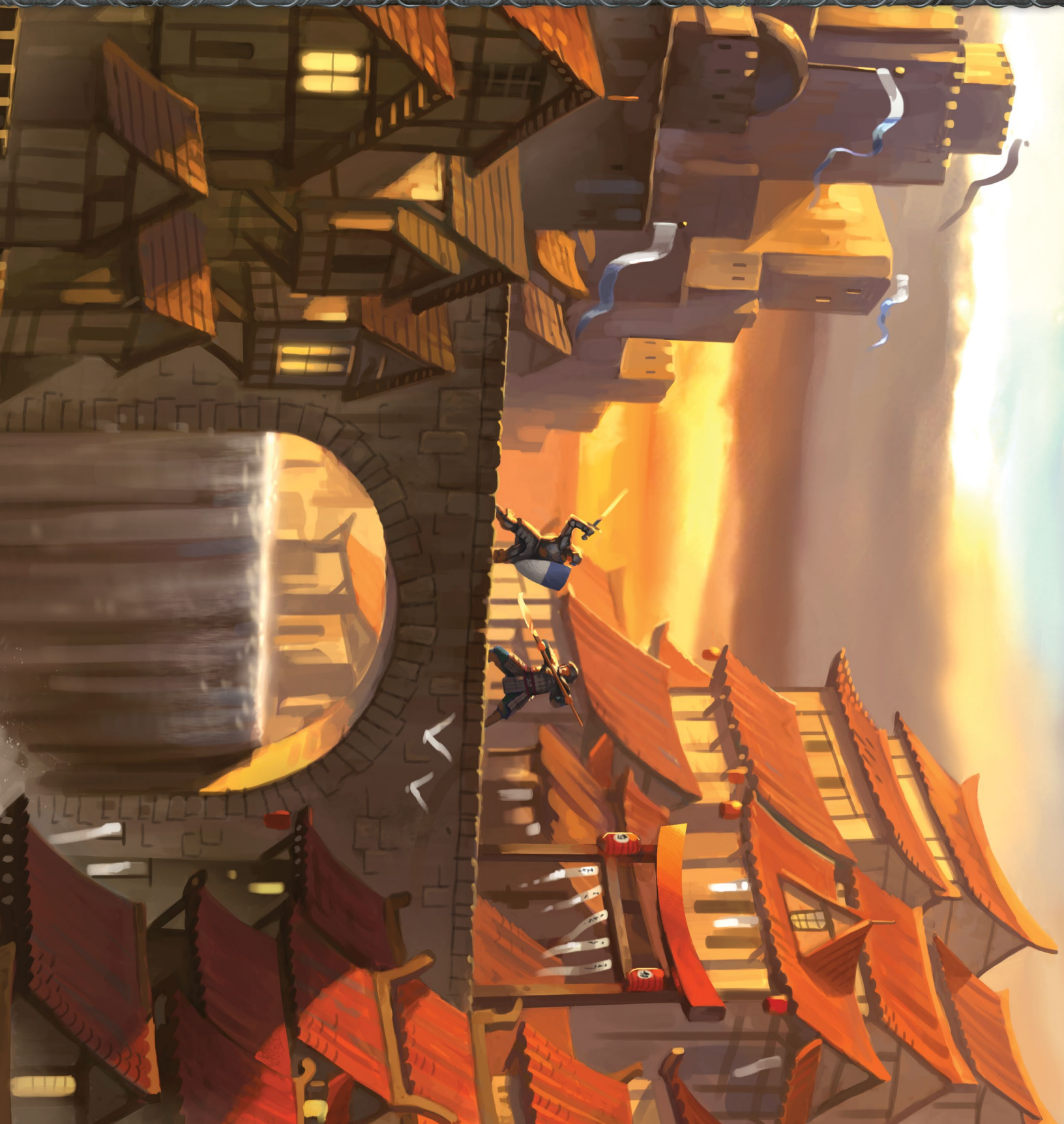
ISSUE 428 | OCTOBER 2013

DRAGON®

A Dungeons & Dragons® Roleplaying Game Supplement



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ON THE COVER: *Eric Belisle offers a scene of East meeting West in the city of Westgate, where the two don't always get along.*

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DRAGON October 2013

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Scary Stuff

By Steve Winter

We make up horrors to help us cope with the real ones.
—Stephen King

This month's theme is, unsurprisingly, scary stuff. That puts us in line with hundreds of other October magazines doing Halloween-themed issues. Here you won't find recipes for pumpkin cookies, instructions for carving an award-winning jack-o-lantern, patterns for sewing your own Dracula cape, or a list of the top 25 horror movies suitable for family viewing.

At first glance, D&D appears as if it should be a good fit with horror. Just look at what you start with. Bloodthirsty monsters: check. Walking dead: check. Insane, otherworldly villains: check. Remote, creepy locations: check. Mind-bending events: check.

But D&D is hampered by one ingredient that works against horror: heroism. While it's OK for heroes to get scared like everyone else, their schtick is that they keep on fighting the good fight and enduring through hardship and horror until victory is won. As the heroes of our tabletop adventures, our sights are set on those victories. It's hard to establish a frightening mood when everyone believes in their heart that it will all turn out well in the end.

Horror is always a hybrid, a dark lens through which any genre X can be viewed to get X/horror: mystery/horror, science fiction/horror, fantasy/horror, romance/horror, western/horror, historical/horror. Oddly, sports/horror seems to be underrepresented (not counting titles like "Cheerleader Camp Massacre"). I'd pay to see "The Unnatural" or "The Longest Graveyard." Maybe a bigger sports fan than I can name more titles.

What sets horror tales apart from nonhorror in the same settings are the villains. They aren't always ghosts or werewolves, but they should surprise us and challenge our notion of what's "natural." Cujo is just a normal dog until he's supercharged by rabies. Then he moves beyond our everyday experience of the family pet and takes on aspects of the supernatural.

D&D throws an endless chain of surprising content at players. You have your garden variety cave bears and dire wolves, your insects as big as wagons and birds as big as ships, your dragons that breathe fire and wizards that throw magic fire—and we accept all of that as our characters' day-to-day normality until we're no longer surprised by anything.

That's why volumes of new monsters are always popular sellers. DMs are ever on the hunt for the foe that can make players sit up and go "whaaaat's that?"

The new and surprising doesn't need to be horrific, of course. Fairy tales are filled with whimsical, comical creatures that could never exist in a rational universe, yet they don't frighten us. Our brains are reasonably well wired for distinguishing real threats from the pretend kind.

And that, I think, is why so many of us enjoy a scary story. While our adrenal glands and stomachs are screaming "this is frightening," our subconscious minds are quietly reminding the rest of the body, "relax, it's OK, it's just a story, we're fine," and calmly setting out neurological milk and cookies to make us feel better when it's all over.

It's good to have a brain like that. It's also good to have friends who'll help you take those occasional jumps into fear and emerge safe and sound a few hours later with your limbs and sanity intact.

Backdrop: Westgate

By Erik Scott de Bie

Illustration by Eric Belisle

"Coin can buy almost anything in Westgate, and what coin can't afford, blood certainly can."

—Ilira "Fox-at-Twilight" Nathalan,
The Year of the Awakened Sleepers, 1484 DR

Known as the Gateway to the West, this seedy port metropolis was born in piracy and greed, built on the backs of slaves, and sealed with blood. Westgate is the most powerful city on the Inner Sea, and it thrives on trade and skullduggery.

Westgate is a city of dangerous opportunity. Anyone can make it big with enough gold, regardless of how it was obtained. The gold of half-orcs, drow, known criminals, and vicious warlords spends just as well as that of anyone else, and one's history poses no impediment to advancement. The two main hurdles folk face in the city are their own scruples and the host of others who have none. Fall, and a dozen rivals will scramble over you—and probably kick and stab you on the way.

A City of Secrets

Westgate arose from the jagged Dragon Coast on the south edge of the Sea of Fallen Stars many centuries ago under the cruel eye of a powerful dragon. Saldrinar of the Seven Spells overthrew the monster and named himself king some 1,700 years ago. Ruled since by a succession of tyrants, pirate kings, and

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even monsters like vampires and lamias, the city ultimately did away with its monarchy over two hundred years ago. Since then, the council of ruling lords has ruled the independent port city, free of foreign influence, where coin is king.

Daily Life in Westgate

Merchants of Westgate can and do make underhanded deals and take as much advantage of their clients and supposed partners as possible. It is considered a mark of pride to get away with a good deal, especially if the other party loses more than they gain. Unscrupulous business practices are barely illegal, and suspicious watchmen can always be bribed or done away with.

Second to gold, violence is the city's other currency. Bodies wash up out of the bay or are dumped in the street every morning, and some of the streets have acquired a perpetual red stain from spilled blood. Wealth matters only as much as the strength one can employ to gain it and keep it.

Law and Order

Westgate is a free city, stubborn in its resistance to foreign interests, but the Ruling Council keeps a tight hold on its people.

For decades, Westgate was effectively run and policed by the notorious Night Masks gang. Eventually the Masks' power was broken by an alliance of merchants, adventurers, and rival gangs that scooped up the fragments of power scattered by the Night Masks' fall.

Westgate now employs a city watch about 2,000 strong. Its primary duties are suppressing uprisings and stopping riots. Troopers of the watch are outfitted with leather armor, blades, and nets to capture troublemakers. As with most things in Westgate, the amount of trouble someone can expect from the city watch depends more on the weight of their purse than on their adherence to the law. Most watch officers and municipal officials are corrupt to one degree or another.

Despite the lawlessness, theft, murder, and other crimes are just as illegal in Westgate as they would be anywhere else. Unless an offense is committed against a merchant lord, criminals can usually get off with a fine: the more of the "fine" that is paid directly to the arresting officers and the judge, the lower the official fine will be. Rich merchants have been known to use the city watch against business rivals and other annoyances such as pesky adventurers who nose around where they're not wanted.

The leadership of the city watch and the seat as chief judge are combined into a single powerful office called the Just Captain. Currently that title is held by Torpin Urdo, the third son of his house (and he is glad to be far removed from the line of succession, with its inherent dangers). Torpin is a rarity in Westage; he is a (mostly) honest man, which chiefly means he costs more to bribe than most other officials.

Westgate has no standing army out of fear that it might endanger commercial liberties. The council prefers instead to hire mercenaries or pirates in times of war. Several thousand mercenaries live in the city year-round, always hungry for jobs to tide them over until the next armed conflict.

USING WESTGATE

Westgate lends itself to dark, morally ambiguous fantasy stories like those of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser or *Thieves' World*. You can draw inspiration from films like *The Godfather* and from television shows like *The Sopranos* and *The Shield*.

Though Westgate exists officially in the Forgotten Realms, the city fits any fantasy setting that highlights urban intrigue and moral ambiguity.

A City of Scoundrels

Power in Westgate shifts daily or even hourly between grasping merchants and vile cults. Here, greed is good, and ruthlessness is even better. Everyone who holds a position of power in Westgate is connected, directly or indirectly, to the city's criminal enterprises. Given the level of corruption in Westgate, no one without such connections could ever rise to prominence. The corruption rises up from the bottom and sinks down from the top to meet in the middle and infect every level of society.

The Ruling Council

Power in Westgate ostensibly rests in the hands of an appointed council of the most powerful merchants in the city, themselves chosen by a Croamarkh (first lord) elected by the people every four years. As one might imagine, elections are not particularly free and balanced, so the word of the merchant lords is key in anointing a Croamarkh.

The Croamarkh is the speaker for the council, the de facto general of any mercenary army hired by the lords, and the final arbiter of political and legal decisions. He or she can be overruled by the council, though this rarely happens: the Croamarkh, like the other merchant lords, acts primarily to enrich the council. Some Croamarkhs have been lords of the people, well loved and respected by the populace, while others (such as the current Lord Jaundamicar Bleth) rule through fear and violence.

The council has proven a surprisingly stable body of government, despite occasional tumults. After the Dhostar debacle over a century ago, when a croamarkh's son tried to take over Westgate, the weakened council craved new leadership and offered seats at the ruling table to the recently arrived Bleth and Cormaeril families, both of which were exiled

from Cormyr as traitors. These families brought with them their ties to the Fire Knives, a group of assassins dedicated to ending the Obaskyr line in Cormyr. In Westgate the group licked its wounds and turned itself toward garnering power in the city. Today the Croamarkh's ties to the Fire Knives criminal syndicate are an open secret among the city's powerful.

Just behind the Fire Knives in influence are two merchant houses that exert considerable power in the city. An increasing number of ships in the bay fly the red sun banner of House Malavhan, in part because of secret bargains the house matriarch Lady Devis struck with pirates on the Sea of Fallen Stars. The steel-gray hand flag of ruthless House Vhammos is showing up more and more as a slave brand on the streets, and Vhammos saves a fortune on tariffs through its extensive smuggling operations.

Beneath these top-tier powers, a second stratum of merchant houses scrambles for influence and wealth. These houses are constantly on the alert for signs of weakness in those above them. The most prominent include Thorsar (wealthy traders), Guldar (known for their nobility), Ssemm (generous in donating to municipal efforts), and Urdo (great scholars). The most wealthy Shou family, the Goto clan, is also vying for position on the Ruling Council. Its effort is supported by shrewd manipulation of public opinion and the deep coffers of the Shadowmasters of Telflamm, who are keen to expand their influence in the region. Goto's ascension could mark the dawn of a new era of east-west relations in the city, or it could spark rioting and open warfare.

The merchant lords were shaken by recent claims that House Darkdance may have descended from Westgate's last king. Only one member of that house remains: Myrin Darkdance, orphaned, unmarried, and childless. If House Darkdance is truly linked to the ancient kings, Myrin may become a target of those seeking to preserve Westgate's current structure and those seeking to change it.

The Fire Knives

Jaundamicar Bleth has been Croamarkh for the past two decades, thanks in part to the great debt of gratitude Westgate owes the Cormyrian houses. Bleth and Cormaeril were instrumental in driving out the legendary Night Masks, thus freeing up space for a new thieves' guild: theirs.

House Bleth derives considerable power as the head of the Fire Knives. Having sworn undying revenge on the Forest Kingdom and the Obarskyr dynasty, they have lurked in Westgate for over a century, building their power base until they can strike back and reclaim what they perceive as their birthright. They are a vicious gang of assassins whose calling card—a dagger wreathed in flame—is widely and correctly feared.

Jaundamicar Bleth, Faltering Lord

For many years, the power-hungry Jaundamicar entertained ambitions to change his title from Open Lord to King, but his grip on power is slipping. The Nine Golden Swords uprising of the late 1470s slew many of his lieutenants, his sons, and his wife. Left a broken old man, Bleth has mostly lost the respect (and fear) of the people of Westgate. His subordinates look to the ascension of his last heir—his daughter Rigante—to restore the family's power.

Rigante Bleth, the Fire Princess

Known for her fiery temper, the daughter of Jaundamicar Bleth has only recently returned to Westgate after a long absence. In 1476, she had a falling out with her father over her scandalous courtship with the paladin Muorn Cormaeril, uniting the two families. For the last decade, she has joined her new husband in riding with the Draeven marauders out of Proskur, who are sworn to resist Cormyr's occupation. When her mother and brothers were slain, she finally yielded to her ailing father's requests to return and take over the family business.

Jaundamicar is fading, but Rigante is young, strong, and fierce. Some compare her to the legendary Steel Princess Alusair Obarskyr of Cormyr, and she makes a natural counterpoint to Princess Raedra of the modern era. If the Bleths are to hold onto power, she is their best chance.

Gangs of Westgate

Ironically, the criminals who rule Westgate are themselves undermined by other criminals in the form of the city's gangs and ruthless mercantile consortiums. The most dangerous threat to the power of the Fire Knives of these is the return of the Night Masks, but lesser gangs have proven a thorn in the side of Houses Bleth and Cormaeril as they consolidated power.

The Eye of Justice

This highly militant order of knights grew out of the shattered Night Masks a century ago, operating in the city to bring vigilante justice to those the law refuses to or cannot touch.

After so many years, the Eye's noble aims have fallen by the wayside, and many of its members have become very corrupt. Today, because of their brutal methods and their frequent alliances with the Fire Knives, most residents of Westgate see the Eye of Justice as little more than well-connected thugs. Often they serve as muscle for hire—a weapon to be used by one merchant house against another.

More detail on the Eye of Justice can be found in the article of the same name in *Dungeon* 171.

The Nine Golden Swords

The Fire Knives have faced opposition from various gangs undermining their power, though few have been as successful as the Nine Golden Swords.

Since the Spellplague a century ago, Shou refugees have flooded into Faerun, particularly the Dragon

Coast. They found a difficult life awaiting them in Westgate's slums. In 1441, nine heroes—warriors and wizards in their native Shou-Lung—arose from the ranks of the poor to defend those who could not fight for themselves. They declared that all Shou in Westgate were under their protection, and they carved out a territory for the Shou in the east end of the city. Disputed Tidetown became a battleground.

Although the nine were courageous and committed to doing the right thing, their movement could not endure without powerful backing. By 1450, they had accepted funding and more direct forms of support from Shou criminal organizations in Telflamm who were eager to gain a foothold in Westgate. Agents from Telflamm played upon the nine's heroic legacy, first to win the confidence of the Shou populace of Westgate and then to build their own criminal guild in the city under the banner of the Nine Golden Swords. More than one of the original nine heroes objected to this alliance with gangsters, but in the end, as always in Westgate, the gang's seemingly endless flow of cash won out over the nine's example of gallantry.

By the 1470s, conflict between the growing Shou organization and the established Fire Knives escalated into all-out warfare, with the two gangs competing directly for control of Westgate's blood-soaked streets. The Swords murdered most of House Bleth's leadership, thereby smashing the Fire Knives' control over that clan and the city.

After the war against the Fire Knives, the few surviving members of the original Nine Golden Swords, disgusted by the dishonor the guild had heaped upon itself, severed ties with the organization. These samurai walk the streets today, defending the defenseless and serving the cause of justice. Most of them are now very old but still worthy of the legends told of them.

A HEROIC LEGACY

None can say for certain how many of the original heroes that gave rise to the Nine Golden Swords survive to this day, but many are quick to claim part of the legend. The gutter drunk Mu-Mushi seems to be the genuine article, and most agree that the eccentric wizard Raikou is another. A half-elf Shou thief who calls herself "Grey" is widely thought to be one of the nine, and she is happy to make the claim at her occasional public stunts, where she embarrasses corrupt merchants and divides their gold. Though she never speaks of it, the elderly priestess Chouko, who operates a shrine to Chauntea in the East End, seems of the proper age and disposition, and an aura of heroism surrounds her.

The Night Masks

Darkness stirs once more with the newest, greatest threat to Westgate: the return of the Night Masks. The thieves and killers of the Night Masks wear black eye-masks and hunt at night. As suggested by this symbol, most of the rank-and-file is faithful to Mask, god of thieves, but the modern leaders of the guild care little for faith other than as propaganda. As of old, the guild seeks a stranglehold on power in the city through embezzlement, protection rackets, weapons deals, and all sorts of sordid criminal activity.

Guild Organization

The Night Masks consist of hundreds of low-level agents—thieves, assassins, spies—who report to middle-ranked agents whose loyalty to the guild is well-established. Wise junior members of the Masks assume they are constantly being watched, as is true in many cases. The middle agents ("Knights") answer to a coven of Night Masters, each of whom has command over one aspect of the guild's operations, be they extortion, theft, or murder.

Historically, the thieves' guild ruled Westgate from the shadows for many years under a court of Night Masters—a shadow council to match the ruling lords, each of them given control over a certain segment of crime in the city. They went through several leaders, including a doppelganger called the Faceless, then Victor Dhostar, a human lord who hid his appearance with a magic mask. Setback after setback brought them low, and the guild might have collapsed if not for the coming of the vampires.

Orbakh, Lord of the Zhentarim

Still undead after many centuries, the one-time vampire king of Westgate Orlak found a terrible treasure beneath the city: a clone of the infamous Manshoon. He turned the clone into a vampire, but the creature turned upon him and for a time assumed his mantle as Orlak II before changing his name to Orbakh. With the aid of the Night King's regalia (a magic cup called the Argraal, an animated dagger called the Flying Fangs, and the Maguscepter of Myntharan), Orbakh seized control of the Night Masks, allied with the Fire Knives, ensorcelled or turned many nobles into vampires, and soon dominated most of Westgate from the shadows.

Orbakh might have openly crowned himself king, but his naked ambition and brutality earned him powerful enemies. The Fire Knives betrayed the Masks, siding with the merchant lords, the fledgling Eye of Justice, and outlander adventurers to drive them from the city shortly after the Spellplague a century ago. One of the few surviving vampires of the Night Masks and ultimately the last surviving clone of Manshoon, Orbakh turned his ambitions to consolidating the Zhentarim. He maintains occasional oversight over Westgate, but leaves the management in the hands of his old lieutenant, Kirenkirsalai.

Kirenkirsalai, Heir of Night

Over the last five years, one man has single-handedly restored the once undisputed rule of the Night Masks through a campaign of murder, intimidation, and illusion. He is an older entity than anyone suspects, and his roots in the city run deep.

The half-drow Tebryn "Shadowstalker" Dhialael was once a lowly member of the guild in the 1340s and 50s until a duel with a rival forced him to flee underground. He spent almost a decade as a slave in the drow city of Sschindylryn until he escaped and returned to his ancestral home, only to fall prey to Orbakh's Flying Fangs. Now a vampire, Tebryn became one of Orbakh's Night Court, where his extensive experience with the guild proved invaluable.

Tebryn survived the fall of the Masks and took refuge with the secretive Zhentarim, though he never stopped rebelling (to his master's amusement). Decades ago, Orbakh instructed his insubordinate servant to ply illusion magic to insinuate himself among the Shou. Donning the name Kirenkirsalai (or "Kire") for the first time, he presented himself as a wise old man, skilled in the arts of magic and stealth.

KIRENKIRSALAI, VAMPIRE LORD

Kire is a powerful vampire for his relative youth, and his ruthless sadism often gets the better of him, especially during negotiation. He is cold, arrogant, and deadly. A half-elf of drow descent in life, Kire long ago mastered the arts of illusion magic and shadowdancing (teleporting between shadows), which he combines to befuddle foes and strike without warning. He prefers to shape a rapier from pure darkness to use in battle.

As one of the original Nine Golden Swords, he saw to the perversion of the band's ideals and the rise of a city-wide thieves' guild.

After the Swords crippled the Fire Knives, Orbakh rewarded Kirenkirsalai by placing him in command of Westgate's underworld. Kire recruited his own circle of Night Masters and declared the Night Masks reborn. Now he builds up his dominance of Westgate in preparation to take over the city.

Court of Night Masters

The nameless vampire crimelords who operate the Night Masks hide their identities behind eye masks, and their names are known to few other than their creator, Kirenkirsalai.

The most public of the Night Masters is the Twilight Knight, a young hot-headed vampire who calls himself Vengeance and wields a powerful sword consecrated to Hoar, God of Retribution. His left arm is swaddled in withered bandages as though from a long ago injury. He serves as the guild's enforcer.

The guild's chief spy and assassin, the Duke of Shadows is a pudgy man with an easy voice and charismatic manner. As a scion of House Vhammos, he always dresses in rich attire, preferring red and black to hide bloodstains.

More vampires serve Kire as Night Masters—the Dutchess of Death and the Duke of Whispers, the Count of Coins and the Countess of Storms—but their identities are a closely held secret.

A City of Mysteries

The Gateway to the West has a long-standing reputation as a free city, open to all manner of trade and all races, so long as they respect the legal authority of the oligarchy. The favorable location of the port, its relaxed tariffs and casual corruption, and a willingness to hire pirates to deal with disagreeable shipping captains have combined to make Westgate rich and free from would-be invaders.

Market Triangle and Shops

A triangular market in the center of the city is open every day from dawn until after dusk, though only the best protected merchants do business after dark. At the center of the market is the Tower, a 5-story stone edifice where trade in the city is regulated. Its massive coffers demand a strong defensive force, making it an attractive but dangerous mark for thieves.

Westgate is an excellent place to shop, in particular at Silks at Dawn, a high end boutique known for its gorgeous dresses and amazingly functional clothing. Unlike most of the shops in the city, the Silks pays no protection money to the Night Masks, and it is rarely the target of thieves. Patrons credit its powerful owner, a former adventurer called Ilira Nathalan (who also owns the Purple Lady, see below).

Travelers interested in more mundane equipment can resupply at the Blind Eye, which started as a simple tack and trail shop outside the west wall and has become a full-fledged outlet for adventuring gear). The shop is notoriously the site of many underhanded ambushes and illicit double-dealing.

Temple District

Westgate prides itself on its openness and tolerance for multiple faiths, even those considered reprehensible or bizarre in other lands. Temples cater to outlander adventurers, dispensing healing potions, blessings, and auguries—all for a price.

Two temples in the northwest quarter of the city compete in a race to glorify their respective deities: Fortuneboon Hall, sworn to Tymora the goddess of luck, and Painbless Hall, sworn to Loviatar and very popular with many decadent young nobles. Both have wealthy, anonymous backers and pour donations into construction, with substantial coin skimmed off

the top by corrupt clergy. The comparatively simple temple to Ilmater, called simply The House, is famous for its Spire of Suffering, which can be seen from miles outside the city.

The relatively simple Morningstar Haven pays homage to both Lathander and Amauntor, using either name for the same sun god. Whitecap Hall (Umberlee) caters to pirates and smugglers and has recently been the site of clashes between clergy and the town watch.

Lesser temples and shrines exist to gods that fell out of favor or vanished from Westgate for a time, such as the House of Spires and Shadows (Mask), The House of the Wheel (Gond), and the hulking monolith the House of the Winds (Talos). Priests have only recently resumed services in these halls.

The subterranean House of Steel (Garagos, beneath the Market Triangle) has become a haunted ruin that repels attempts to reclaim it (see Sewers).

Inns and Taverns of the Old City

Westgate caters to travelers of all lands and stripes, from the decadent to the gutter-poor, so long as they have at least some coin to spend.

The city's most glamorous watering hole is the wealthy Rosebud tavern, which boasts an ale garden on the River Thunn that separates the Old City from the East End. Those with less coin patronize Big Edna's, which caters mostly to fishermen and sailors, or a centrally located dive called the Black Eye tavern and festhall, where folk who take part in the commonplace bar brawls often end up in the harbor. The scoundrels of the city congregate in the Rotten Root, a gloomy place marked by the sign of a black-barked treant that looms over the entrance.

Those interested in dance and pleasurable company can find it at one of Westgate's popular clubs, open by night for revelry and pickpocketing. The Purple Lady festhall down on the Ssemm Spur is famous for its attractive waitstaff clad in diaphanous purple robes. Its owner, the perpetually black-clad elf lady Ilira Nathalan (who also owns Silks at Dawn near the Market Triangle), is a skilled and passionate dancer, and if one is charming and agile enough to keep up with her, the experience is unforgettable.

Nobles visiting the city for a time often stay near Mulsantir's Gate at the Jolly Warrior Inn, which caters primarily to travelers and has a relaxed atmosphere. Wealthier folk often drink and sleep at the Blue Banner (patronized extensively by House Bleth). The slightly cheaper Gentle Ghost Inn offers one a chance to catch a glimpse of the ghost of a former proprietor that haunts its rooms. Those looking for a bed on the cheap should try the Bent Mermaid inn, famous for its sign depicting a rather mightily endowed mermaid folded almost in half, or the Black Boot by the River Bridge, where brawls and murder are commonplace.

Noble Villas

The merchant lords of Westgate dwell in impressive keeps scattered around the Old City or just outside Westgate's walls, all of them walled off and eminently defensible during the occasional uprising.

Of particular note is the once-magnificent Castle Bleth a stone's throw from the city's south wall, grown hollow and sad as Jaundamicar's fortunes have waned. The merchant council prefers to meet at Castle Cormaeril just northwest of the city to conduct its business. The craggy, cliff-side path to the castle is treacherous and a good place for ambushes.

Standing at the west end of the city, Castle Thalavar passed to Gedrin "Shadowbane" upon his mother Thistle's passing, and it has since become the refuge of the Eye of Justice (see above).

Dock Ward

The commercial heart of the city, Westgate's seedy docks see enough commerce on a daily and nightly basis to rival most other civilized lands in Faerun. Goods (legal or illegal) and coin of all sorts change hands at all hours, and the merchant houses of Westgate constantly vie for control of the area so they can take their cut of trade tariffs. Each of the merchant lords owns a section of dock and multiple warehouses, some obvious, some hidden.

Gang violence is particularly fierce near the disputed docks so the watch patrols the docks. Officers stationed here tend to be especially corrupt, and "fines" are usually sufficient to make the law look the other way.

Tidetown

When the Sea of Fallen Stars receded during the Wailing Years, much of the harbor became semi-solid ground. Shou immigrants settled the area and erected a crude neighborhood on the uneven ground. The council might not have bothered about it at all, but suddenly ships could only get to the lower docks, so the merchant houses scrambled to build infrastructure there just to compete. This waterside slum became known as Tidetown, and the Nine Golden Swords and Fire Knives constantly fought over it.

Recently, the waters have begun to rise again, making Tidetown increasingly treacherous. Most have simply abandoned their homes for drier climes, though some have expanded upward on stilts. As a result, the harbor is dotted with miniature man-made islands where residents offer food and other services to inbound ships, much to the consternation of mainland businesses. Pirates also stage ambushes from these floating houses, and criminals often go here to hide from the watch.

Raikou's Tower

One enterprising Shou wizard has kept his home in Tidetown just as it is, rain or flood. One of the original Nine Golden Swords, Sopata Raikou has built up his tower to withstand all intrusion, be it from weather or would-be robbers. Fifty feet of the tower is underwater, and a further fifty feet rises into the air, its spire flickering with dancing effigies of spectral foxes and birds. The magical effects provide a guiding light for ships at sea. Raikkou himself has not been seen in at least a decade.

The Sewers

League upon league of unexplored, dripping tunnels underlie Westgate, connecting to various old houses and holdfasts. In a city thousands of years old, it is hardly surprising that many of these old dungeons and hideaways have been forgotten. Urban legends persist of fabulous lost treasures belonging to old King Verovan or Orlak the Night King, just waiting to be found in the dank, stinking underworld.

Swords of Night

Some years ago, an heir of House Vhammos led a delving crew in search of access to a rival house's vault and broke through into the forgotten House of Steel, a temple to the ravager god Garagos. The temple's old defenses—animated swords and various undead guardians—slaughtered most of the heir's party and left him dying. The Night King came upon him and turned him into a vampire to join the Night Masters. The temple is now the Night Masks' guildhall.

Sleeping Danger

A common expression in Westgate used to urge caution is "Don't wake the Quelzarn." The creature has not been seen in decades, so that many believe it an urban legend. If only the city were so lucky.

THE SEA OF FALLEN STARS

The Spellplague of a century gone had little effect on Westgate with one exception: the Sea of Fallen Stars drained partially, significantly altering the landscape and disrupting commerce. Recently, the sea has been rising once more, but many effects linger. Flooding is common in Westgate, and collapsing structures reveal the entrances to secret passages and dungeons hidden long ago by lords building in Tidetown.

Westgate's infamous resident sea monster, the giant aquatic serpent hibernates deep in the oldest sewers beneath the city. This particular quelzarn has swelled to truly massive size over the last century, and its massive bulk extends through more than one tunnel. When roused it breaks through sewer walls and burrows through the underworld like a worm. Its natural hunting grounds are subterranean, but it has been known to strike at ships in the bay or humanoids along the docks.

The East End

Westgate's East End (sometimes called "Shou Town") is the undisputed territory of the Shou in the city. Crossing the bridge gives one the sense of stepping into a different world, surrounded by calligraphy-inscribed banners and heavily Shou-inspired architecture. Shou faces are the norm here, and justice comes at the blades of the Nine Golden Swords.

The Quivering Thumb

Just outside the city's East End lies the fantastically popular gladiatorial arena called the Quivering Thumb (so named for a legendary duel involving a troll that refused to die). Due to its success over the last century, the arena has invested in marvels both mechanical and magical that can shape its environs to accommodate everything from icy mountain duels to sea battles to one memorable aerial jousting tourney. A slave who survives a year of escalating challenges in the arena wins his freedom, and coin prizes are offered for outlanders who wish to test their strength and courage.

The Timeless Blade

This scenic dojo overlooking the drop-off to the sea near the River Bridge is equal parts swordplay school and refuge for meditation. The Blade charges no fees, but it accepts only those students who can prove their potential in duels against several of the school's masters. Once a student is in, the utmost commitment is expected. The headmaster of this secretive school is thought to be a gray-eyed half-elf called Lueth, but no one outside the school can say much about him (or possibly her) with certainty and those within the school don't discuss its workings with outsiders.

MU-MUSHI, DRUNKEN MASTER

The aged Mu-Mushi is a fixture on Westgate's East End: a wandering man in rags, he is rude, smelly, and obnoxious. Travelers avoid or openly mock him, but the locals know not to cross Mu-Mushi. As one of the original Nine Golden Swords, the man is a legend among the Shou of Westgate, easily matched with the greatest warriors in a hundred leagues. He is known to ask cryptic questions of those who catch his interest and to dispense seeming nonsense.

The Seven Lost Gods

A set of seven hills west of the city, each topped with a menhir ring, were consecrated at a time when temples were prohibited in Westgate and remained even after the edict was reversed. Enterprising nobles and merchants often hire adventurers to explore the unopened subterranean temples that supposedly underlie most or all of the hills.

The most memorable of the menhir-topped hills is the unsettling Hill of Fangs with its crimson plinths, sworn to Moander. The others honor Garagos, Ghaunadaur, Jergal, Savras, Silvanus, and a long forgotten deity. Local sage Iak Hovas speculates this is Auppenser, Jhaamdathi god of mental magic, but this has not been proven one way or another.

BEYOND WESTGATE

The environs immediately surrounding Westgate and the greater Dragon Coast offer vast possibilities for intrigue-laden adventure. For instance:

The nearby city of Teziir was formed originally as a place for honest merchants to escape Westgate, which makes it a natural haven for those ousted from Westgate to drum up righteous indignation against rivals.

The city of Proskur, far to the west of the city, has been annexed by Cormyr. The Draeven Marauders (including Rigante Bleth) seek at all times to throw off the Forest Kingdom's influence.

The city of Elversult has recently seen the growing influence of a cult of the demon prince Graz'zt, which is turning its eye toward Westgate as a new city to dominate.

In recent years, torch lights have been seen in the area, leading some to believe ancient rites are being performed among the hills.

A City of Adventures

Glory and rewards await some of those daring enough to delve Westgate's underworld, and ignominious death waits for others

Coin is king in Westgate, and a clever mind, nimble fingers, or a quick wit will find plenty to be earned in Westgate. All the merchant houses are constantly looking for able warriors and wizards to do all sorts of tasks they cannot directly perform without compromising themselves. Indirect operatives often post such opening in every tavern or festhall adventurers are known to frequent. Any adventurers operating in the city for any length of time will find themselves--justly or not--on the wrong side of the law, and if they acquire too much wealth or power, they will attract rivals like flies.

The various mercantile houses of Westgate are constantly wrestling for advancement, undercutting business rivals, stealing or sabotaging shipments, or sometimes killing enemy agents. Often, the houses cannot act directly or risk the Ruling Council's displeasure, so they hire foreign adventurers to do their dirty work for them. Such agents offer two important benefits: plausible deniability and easy severance. Working for one or more of the merchant lords, adventurers stand to make a good deal of coin, but if a deal turns bad, they will find their employers quickly desert them.

Fistful of Coins

Houses Guldar and Ssemm have been feuding for the past decade, largely over a rotten trade deal the details of which neither house recalls precisely. Commonfolk and servants loyal to one house or the other shout and harass one another on the street, and brawls erupt in taverns on a regular basis. The conflict has grown so bad that two common street insults have cropped up: "black bird," in reference to Guldar's black hawk banner, meaning a "pompous would-be noble," and "white bird," a "greedy hypocrite who does good only for coin" in reference to Ssemm's white talon.

Recently, the two houses are competing over a rumored treasure hoard buried somewhere in Westgate's sewers. The treasure belongs to a black dragon called Wehrgemohr and is said to consist of artifacts and heirlooms belonging to both houses. The dragon has not been seen in years, and the houses are recruiting skilled adventurers to find the hoard and claim it for them, and impede agents of the other house in the process. Particularly cunning adventurers might play the two sides against one another for greater pay, manipulating them into greater conflict, but that would be a dangerous game indeed.

Alternatively, the adventurers might stumble upon the hoard quite by accident, and then have to decide what to do with it, when both houses extend a full claim. They might try to split the treasure (with a finder's fee for their trouble) or find some way to hide it and/or defend it.

Foreign Influence

The grasping merchants that rule Westgate have ever been Faerunian houses, but recently a Shou family has risen to prominence. Since the fracturing of the Swords, Matriarch Akuma of House Goto has struck out on her own through a campaign of civic improvement coupled with surgical strikes against her mercantile rivals, and is now making an aggressive bid for a seat on the Ruling Council. Akuma is searching for adventurers to act as bodyguards, thieves, or even assassins against her enemies in the city, plus artisans, bards, and engineers to create great works of

art to beautify her adopted city—winning hearts and minds through the distribution of coin.

Nothing to Lose But Their Chains

Over the past months, House Thorsar, looking to muscle in on House Vhammos's increasingly lucrative trade presence, has launched an intense smear campaign to damage their credibility. Meanwhile, Thorsar is looking for discrete agents to head off the Nymph's Bosom, a smuggling ship supposedly loaded with goods from across the Inner Sea. Anyone who takes the job will be placed in a serious bind, as Vhammos's ship carries nearly a hundred slaves. While illegal in Westgate, slaves are still bought and sold secretly. Heroes who free or protect these slaves face the wrath of two merchant houses.

Cult of the Old Seven

Some believe the seven hills outside Westgate were originally sworn to gods that were ancient before the interloping "Westgate Seven" ever came to Faerun. A cult operating out of the city is currently in the process of defiling the shrines on the hilltops, with an eye to re-consecrate them to older, darker deities. Whether the Cult of the Old Seven follows a real set of deities or not, their actions have caused a furor among the faithful of Westgate. No soldiers from the city have ever been able to catch them in the act.

Broken Waystation

A century ago, the little-known inn called Blais House (near the Blue Banner Inn at the end of East Market Street) catered to planar travelers and "in the know" mages. For a century, it has been sealed to all patrons, its portals broken and disconnected. Recently, the unstable magic at Blais House has interfered with nearby Aurora's Emporium, specifically disrupting its extensive teleportation network. Aurora is seeking adventurers who can repair the broken connections and perhaps reopen Blais's doors.

Legacy of Bondage

Over a century ago, a cabal of evil sorcerers and priests (including representatives of the Fire Knives) wrought a set of blue tattoos to control numerous adventurers based in the Dragon Coast. Recently, marks similar to the legendary Azure Bonds have appeared among Westgate's lower classes, suggesting that someone (or something) has unearthed the secret of their construction. What foul events this presages cannot be guessed.

Purple Dragon's Reach

If Westgate has a national enemy, it is "imperialist" Cormyr. Over the last century, the Forest Kingdom has expanded its borders in the name of resisting Netheril, going so far as to annex the Dragon Coast city of Proskur several days to the west.

Outlander heroes are often hired to protect Cormyrians operating in the area, while less noble adventurers can earn coin robbing Cormyrian merchants, rooting out Highknight agents, or otherwise frustrating the efforts of "imperialist" Cormyr.

Recently, word has circulated of a noble heir to a Cormyrian family who has gone missing while on a pleasure cruise on the Sea of Fallen Stars. Pirates (hired by House Malavhan) are suspected. But is the heir truly a prisoner, or a willing hostage?

About the Author

Erik Scott de Bie is an author and game designer, best known for his work in the beloved panoramic *Forgotten Realms* setting. His most recent novel is *Shadowbane: Eye of Justice*, which is set in Westgate and breathes further life into many of the organizations, locales, and personages herein presented.

KEY DATES

Events that have shaped Westgate's recent history are included below:

- **1385**—The Spellplague disrupts Orbakh and his vampires' magic, tipping the balance of power.
- **1387**—An alliance of Lords, Fire Knives, and the Eye of Justice, along with outlander adventurers drive the weakened Night Court from Westgate. The Fire Knives ascend to take their place.
- **1393**—Increasing waves of refugees from Shou-Lung settle in the area dubbed Tidetown.
- **1451**—Brutal repression of the Shou prompts the emergence of nine heroes to stand up for the people. Dubbed the Nine Golden Swords, they carve out a home for the Shou in the East End. They inspire a new gang to emerge, manipulated by wealthy backers from the East.
- **1463**—Gedrin "Shadowbane" Thalavar passes on his sword Vindicator and dies in battle with his old nemesis, Kirenkirsalai.
- **1470**—Kalen Dren, heir of Shadowbane, comes to Westgate to train with the Eye of Justice.
- **1477**—Tensions between the Nine Golden Swords and the Fire Knives become an open uprising. House Bleth suffers devastating losses over the next years.
- **1487**—Kirenkirsalai completes his own court of Night Masters and declares the Night Masks reborn.

Court of Stars:
The Wild Hunt

By Aaron Infante-Levy

Illustration by Beth Trott

Cerunnos, the Horned Lord, was born in mystery and adopted into the Green Court, becoming the most favored hunter of Oran the Green Lord. But he fell from favor with all courts of the fey and took to a gloaming realm between worlds. The glow of the Horned Lord's bright green eyes was replaced by the light of balefire. With a spectral cavalcade at his command, the legend of the Wild Hunt had begun.

Legends of the Hunt

The Witch of Fates visited the Green Court carrying a firbolg babe in arms. She presented the child to Oran, saying, "Until he sees his destiny in the Lake of Dreams, he shall be your greatest hunter. When his fate is clear to him, only darkness follows."

The Green Lord named the boy Cerunnos. He grew into a strapping firbolg with vibrant eyes. Derided for his adopted status by his father's true daughters, Cerunnos became the greatest hunter in the Green Court, as the witch had foretold.

He never took more than was needed, always with the greatest reverence for the animals. Cerunnos enjoyed wandering deep into the wilds where few dared tread. He avoided only the Lake of Dreams, where his father had forbidden him to go.

Every year, the Green Lord hosted a hunt for the Silver Hind, a mystical creature that always led a merry chase into mysterious regions but that was said to be immortal and impossible to capture. Cerunnos was the first ever to hit the hind with an arrow. Determined to bring the deer as a trophy for his father, he tracked the wounded beast and forgot the edict about the Lake of Dreams.

Cerunnos dashed after the hind, driving it to a cliff overlooking the lake's edge. Drawing his knife, he grappled the deer to the ground, but when he prepared the killing stroke, the emotion and intelligence in the deer's eyes stopped him. At that moment, the hind leapt up and, in doing so, threw Cerunnos from the cliff and into the Lake of Dreams. (Today, fey claim the path to the lake can be found in winter by following the trail of blood and tracks left by the Silver Hind.)

What Cerunnos saw under the waters of the lake changed him. Was it his true parentage? The dark fate that awaited him? An overwhelming cosmic truth of the hunt? Only Cerunnos can say. When he returned to his father, the Green Lord saw the change. Filled with inexplicable rage, Oran exiled his adopted son, cursing him to wander without a home.

Winter's Curse

Obsessed with finding the Silver Hind and redeeming himself, Cerunnos traveled to the demesne of the Prince of Frost. He believed the Silver Hind was a creature born of winter. The Prince of Frost presented

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a challenge: He would reveal the secret of the Silver Hind and give Cerunnos a place in the Winter Court if Cerunnos hunted Oran's daughters and delivered them to be held in the Fortress of Frozen Tears in the Vale of the Long Night.

With an entourage of hunters from among the Winter Fey, Cerunnos traveled until he found his sisters. He remembered the shame they had heaped upon him in childhood, but as soon as he had them in his grasp, he saw in them the same look that he'd seen in the eyes of the Silver Hind. He knew they would face a fate worse than death at the hands of the Pale Prince. Cerunnos then turned on his fellow hunters and slew many of them, driving the others off.

When the Prince of Frost heard what had happened, his cold heart bore a colder anger. He barred Cerunnos from the Winter Court forever and cursed him so that what he hunts will always be just beyond his grasp.

Summer's Curse

Cerunnos then went to Senaliesse, the demesne of Tiandra, the Summer Queen. She agreed to reveal the Silver Hind on one condition: Cerunnos had to decide who was fairer, the queen or the deer. He took the challenge, for how could a beast be fairer than the Queen of Summer?

Tiandra called for the Silver Hind, and in the days while they waited for the beast to come, she grew enamored of Cerunnos. She decided to make him a knight of the court and take him as a consort when the Silver Hind arrived in Senaliesse. Cerunnos had also grown content in the silver grove, and he agreed to stay his hand against the hind for at least as long as it took to judge the contest.

As the Silver Hind entered the court, she discarded her bestial guise and appeared as an eladrin maiden of fierce aspect, a sword of silver at her hip and a bow of white wood on her back. Unknown to Cerunnos, the huntress was none other than the Maiden of the Moon, one of the Gloaming Fey.

Her intense presence took his breath away. Without hesitation, Cerunnos declared the Silver Hind to be the fairest fey lady in the Summer Court. Incensed, Tiandra banished the Maiden from the throne room. She then cursed Cerunnos to work in darkness as a bloodthirsty slayer, calling forth antlers on his head so he could be "a stag for his hind."

Trapped in the Gloaming

Cerunnos had become thrice cursed and found no welcome in the courts of the fey. Instead, he retreated to the shadows of the Gloaming Court with those loyal to him, searching for a way to break the curses. With no way to end his torment, he slid further into savagery as the years passed. The Gloaming had become his prison.

The Horned Lord

An embodiment of vigor and violence associated with the hunt, Cerunnos has a dual nature. As is often the way of fey, he is both a life-giver and a life-taker. His bloodlust is as legendary as his skill.

Faerie Raed

Mortals who encounter the Wild Hunt often suffer memory loss, nightmares, and even madness. Peasants call this phenomenon the Faerie Raed. You might represent the Faerie Raed as a curse, use the Despair Deck from *The Shadowfell: Gloomwrought and Beyond*, or use it as a story device to evoke the ominous feel of adventures involving the Wild Hunt.

Those who survive an encounter with Cerunnos rarely recall more than a few details of his physical appearance due to the Faerie Raed (see the sidebar). Mortals who retain their memories recall Cerunnos as being a giant with great antlers and blazing eyes, though his face is always partially hidden, whether by a hunting helmet or by shadows when he holds court. He wears little besides a hide kilt and wolf-skin cloak, his own skin dyed in blue patterns with woad. There is a palpable predatory aura in the Horned Lord's presence.

Mysteries of the Horned Lord

Because the Wild Hunt can be used in different ways, what Cerunnos hunts for is left up to the DM. Some possibilities follow.

Love

Attractive lovers are favored targets for members of the Wild Hunt, but none holds the Horned Lord's interest. His heart belongs to the Maiden of the Moon, and he goes to great lengths to please her. But the curses placed upon Cerunnos work against him. His bloodthirsty and unprincipled methods are distasteful to the Maiden, and the Pale Prince's curse works to keep his ultimate quarry at a distance.

Dangerous Game

As a test of prowess, Cerunnos seeks the most dangerous game, a fight from which he might not return. Epic-level characters might be the riskiest prey of all.

Freedom

The Wild Hunt wanders between the mortal world and the Feywild. Cerunnos longs to break free of his fetters. After centuries, he searches for someone worthy to take his mantle so that he might finally cast off his curses.

Cerunnos, the Horned Lord **Level 25 Elite Skirmisher**
Medium fey humanoid, firbolg XP 14,000
HP 400; **Bloodied** 200 **Initiative** +23
AC 39, **Fortitude** 37, **Reflex** 38, **Will** 37 **Perception** +24
Speed 8 (forest walk), fly 8 Darkvision
Immune charm, sleep
Saving Throws +2 (+4 against immobilized, restrained, and slowed); **Action Points** 1

Traits

Regeneration
Cerunnos regains 15 hit points whenever he starts his turn and has at least 1 hit point. If Cerunnos takes necrotic damage, his regeneration does not function on his next turn.

Unfettered Hunter
Cerunnos makes saving throws at the start and the end of his turn.

Standard Actions

Spear (lightning, teleportation, weapon) ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Melee 2 or ranged 10 (one creature); +30 vs. AC
Hit: 3d8 + 19 damage (or 33 plus 6d6 lightning damage if Cerunnos scores a critical hit), and Cerunnos teleports the target up to 10 squares.
Effect: Cerunnos shifts up to half his speed. If the attack was ranged, the spear returns to his hand.

Double Attack ✦ **At-Will**
Effect: Cerunnos makes two *spear* attacks.

Horn of the Undying Hunt ✦ **Encounter**
Effect: Close burst 1 mile (allies in the burst that can hear); as a free action, the target can move up to its speed and make a basic attack.

Minor Actions

Baleful Moonfire ✦ **At-Will** (1/round)
Attack: Ranged 10 (one creature); +28 vs. Will
Hit: Until the end of Cerunnos's next turn, the target is marked, grants combat advantage, and cannot benefit from invisibility or concealment.

Triggered Actions

Blood Hunt ✦ **At-Will**
Trigger: An enemy is bloodied by Cerunnos's attack.
Effect (Free Action): Cerunnos can make a *spear* attack against the triggering enemy.

Mortal Strike ✦ **Recharge** when first bloodied
Trigger: Cerunnos hits with a *spear* attack.
Effect (Free Action): The hit becomes a critical hit. If the target drops below 1 hit point due to the hit, Cerunnos gains 1 action point.

Wild Terror (fear, psychic) ✦ **At-Will**
Trigger: An enemy attacks Cerunnos during his turn.
Attack (No Action): Melee 1 (the triggering enemy); +28 vs. Will
Hit: 20 psychic damage, and the target falls prone.

Skills Acrobatics +26, Athletics +24, Nature +24, Stealth +26
Str 25 (+19) **Dex** 28 (+21) **Wis** 24 (+19)
Con 25 (+19) **Int** 20 (+17) **Cha** 26 (+20)
Alignment unaligned **Languages** Common, Elven
Equipment spear, hunting horn, torc

Spear, Torc, and Horn

Three items embody the power of Cerunnos, making the wielder unstoppable in the hunt. A mighty black spear represents and manifests his prowess as a hunter. The torc Cerunnos wears symbolizes his former place among the fey nobility, and it is believed to give the wearer dominion over mundane beasts. The third item is known as the Horn of the Undying Hunt, which reaches across any distance when used by Cerunnos. Legends say that one who knows the proper ritual can use the horn to summon and even control the Wild Hunt.

While Cerunnos lives, anyone who possesses any of these items is subject to the Faerie Raed. Worse, if the Horned Lord learns that someone has one of his treasures, he hunts the thief tirelessly.

The Wild Hunt

The Wild Hunt seems to come into being from thin air, riders descending from the dark heavens. They have no home in any plane and no demesne where the Horned Lord sits upon a throne. Instead, they exist in an endless migration and spend much of that time in the space between worlds, able to cross the threshold only at inauspicious times or when summoned.

Lore

Arcana DC 13: During autumn and winter, fey hunters race across stormy skies, landing to terrorize villages and abduct or slay people and beasts. Sometimes abductees reappear years later, no older, but having only hazy memories of what occurred.

Cerunnos, the thrice-cursed Horned Lord, leads the Wild Hunt.

Arcana DC 18: The many myths about the Wild Hunt agree that it is an omen of war, plague, and death. Firbolgs emulate the true Wild Hunt in their bloody revels.

Arcana DC 26: The Wild Hunt is said to exist on the Feywild, the Shadowfell, and the normal world simultaneously. The hunt has been seen on all three planes.

Members of the Hunt

The Wild Hunt has numerous members, and its composition is not fixed except that Cerunnos is always the leader. He has the allegiance of some hunters, such as firbolgs and centaurs, and he has power over others, such as wild hunt hounds and some undead bound to the Wild Hunt.

Firbolgs

The horns of the hunt run deep in the blood of the firbolgs. These fey giants respect the Horned Lord as one of the few beings who can bring a cessation, however fleeting, to their clan feuds. During any given hunt, only one firbolg claims the title Master of the Wild Hunt. On an unsuccessful hunt, firbolgs of rival clans are likely to turn against each other in competition for the title.

Gloaming Fey

When the crimson hunter's moon rises, the Maiden of the Moon's vengeful eye falls upon evildoers, and she might call the Wild Hunt so that some of her

followers can ride with the grim cavalcade. They hunt wicked and evil lycanthropes, who are the Maiden's ancient enemies. She rarely joins the Wild Hunt directly, instead taking another band of hunters to seek still more evil in other places.

Undead

Undead that delight in chasing mortals join in the Wild Hunt. Some are bound to the Hunt through Cerunnos's power or another fell curse. Others are loyal to Kannoth, vampire lord of Cendriane. Kannoth once rode with the Wild Hunt, and although he escaped, he retains a bond of loyalty with the Horned Lord. During dark nights of the new moon, the undead presence in the Hunt is at its peak.

Warlocks

Some warlocks form pacts with the Horned Lord in the hopes of freeing a loved one from his grasp, though often they end their lives riding with the Wild Hunt for eternity. Others share a kindred spirit with the Hunt, riding alongside the hunters in search of vengeance against elusive quarry.

Encounters with the Hunt

The Wild Hunt has many aspects. It can be incorporated into your game in different ways, from guiding force to main villain.

In designing encounters with the Wild Hunt, you don't have to limit yourself to epic level. The Hunt has countless forms and members. Low-level characters might witness the Wild Hunt and suffer its aftermath (or try to fix the damage). At higher levels, the party might face the Hunt's scouts or vanguard, which is composed of hunters of lower power than Cerunnos. Even the full onslaught of the Hunt could come in waves, especially if the characters are evading a direct attack.

Hooks

Appearances and purposes of the Wild Hunt can strongly affect the feel of the campaign. When the Maiden of the Moon exerts her influence, the Wild Hunt can point the characters in the direction of great evil. The Hunt doesn't go indoors or underground, so the task of rooting evildoers out of their lairs could be left to the party. Alternatively, the Hunt might abduct or force into hiding an important nonplayer character, making the heroes deal with the obstacle if they need the NPC for some reason. You can also use the Wild Hunt to foreshadow future events, such as a war in which the characters play a critical role.

The party could suffer from the Faerie Raed or become bound to the Hunt. Those who witness the Wild Hunt sometimes fall into madness, which might afflict the characters or their allies. A warlock could make a pact with the Horned Lord that binds the character to the Hunt in various ways. Ending such maladies or breaking such bonds might require negotiating with other fey.

ABDUCTED BY THE HUNT

The Wild Hunt might have abducted a player character as part of his or her background. Kinfolk thought the character would never return. During the nightmarish time among the hunters, the abductee did not age, and the character returned to discover that much had changed. The Wild Hunt now haunts the dreams of the character, who still has memory gaps that need to be filled.

Associated Languages: Elven
Associated Skills: Endurance, Nature

Alternatively, the characters might discover the curses placed upon Cerunnos and try to help break them. Doing so is similar to solving the effects of the Wild Hunt on others, but larger in scope. Baba Yaga knows much about breaking curses, but is her magic strong enough to help the Horned Lord? What price does she ask?

Villains

In myths, the Wild Hunt often responds to the call of a magic hunting horn. A cunning villain might seek such a horn and summon the Horned Lord, setting the Hunt against his or her enemies.

Like all fey, the Horned Lord grudgingly obeys the terms of such a deal, but he might provide the characters with clues to break the summoning and allow the Wild Hunt to roam free again. In a campaign rife with intrigue, learning who is manipulating the Hunt makes for an interesting subplot.

Then again, the Wild Hunt might be the villain. At lower levels, the Hunt could harm the characters indirectly, kidnapping or killing allies or friends and destroying property. As the characters oppose the Hunt and undo the damage, the party might become the new quarry. This plot could be combined with discovering Cerunnos's plight. And what happens to the Wild Hunt if the characters kill or free the Horned Lord?

About the Author

Aaron Infante-Levy wrote *Tales of the Caliphate Nights* for Paradigm Concepts and Green Ronin. He lives and works in Hawaii, pursuing an architectural doctorate. When not rendering 3-D models or making C&D documents, he enjoys martial arts, guitar, gardening, and pretending to be an elf on weekends.

Fright Night

Generating Scares in D&D®

By Steve Winter

Illustrations by Wayne England and Vincent Proce

Dungeons & Dragons® adventures are filled with familiar elements of horror, such as undead creatures, flesh-eating monsters, and isolated locations. Yet most D&D adventures don't play out like horror stories. They aren't very frightening.

Sometimes, horror is the goal. Getting scared can be great fun. Just ask anyone who goes to a Tobe Hooper movie, reads a Stephen King novel, or rides a roller coaster. But actually scaring players during a D&D session is a daunting task.

But it's not impossible if you have the proper approach and the right tools. This article describes how to scare your players, if only a little bit, while they're sitting around a table.

Why Isn't D&D Scary?

Most D&D adventures follow the conventions of heroic tales. The heroes of those tales are us. In the guise of our characters, we overcome tremendous obstacles and defeat monstrous evil to emerge battered and bloodied but victorious. That's what heroes do. They prevail over evil.

Horror isn't about prevailing over evil, though. It's about succumbing to evil. "Succumbing" doesn't mean evil always wins. A horror tale can end with evil defeated and the heroes triumphant. For at least a while, however, everyone has to be certain that evil is unstoppable, and that prospect has to be terrifying.

To reach that point, adhere to these six rules.

1. Put evil in charge.
2. Set the stage.
3. Be the storyteller.
4. Make it personal.
5. Break the rules.
6. Watch your speed.

Rule 1: Put Evil in Charge

Every rule that follows derives from this one. If you take nothing else from this article, keep this rule in mind. The original *Ravenloft Campaign Setting* put it this way: "There's a reason why the villain is called 'Master'."

The villain might not know about the characters at the start of the adventure. If he or she does, the danger the characters pose isn't obvious to the villain. While they are unknown, the characters can operate in relative safety. Eventually the villain senses the heroic threat, and that's when the situation really becomes dangerous for the characters.

The villain has spies, informants, and senses just about everywhere. The characters should find it almost impossible to surprise the villain, especially once he or she is aware of their goals. Just as the villain knows what the characters are up to, he or she also knows their weaknesses and won't hesitate to turn those weaknesses into an advantage.

How does the villain accomplish all this? Typical methods include scrying spells and rituals, rodents or birds acting as spies, augury with dark deities, and

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monstrous sixth senses that are beyond human experience. Sentient informants who are motivated by fear, loyalty, or coercion are another possibility.

Although the villain or his or her minions can strike at any time, their attacks and other actions should be triggered by the characters' actions. It might make perfect sense for the villain to strike when the heroes are dining or sleeping, but it's much better to launch an attack in direct response to the characters' activity. This creates a link in the players' minds between action and punishment. "We entered the graveyard" led to "we got attacked;" "we opened the sealed door" led to "the town was cursed;" "we went to speak to the duchess" led to "a werewolf slaughtered the duchess." Such links reinforce the notion among the players that every action carries risk to themselves and to innocent bystanders. Very soon, they start to fear the repercussions of every move, despite the fact that they must keep moving if they hope to win.

The corollary to this rule is that neither the characters nor the players should fully understand what they're up against until very late in the adventure. Keeping them in the dark isn't the idea. Players must be painfully aware they don't see the full picture. In what might be the most-quoted line regarding fear ever penned, H. P. Lovecraft wrote that "The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown."

Players should always have a list of unanswered questions about the threat they face. A good question to top the list is, "What is this thing, exactly?" The list can shrink and grow as characters answer questions and uncover new ones, but the list must never go away or cease to matter. What's more, the only way to stop the evil should be to acquire the missing answers. The only way to acquire those answers is to press ahead into danger, gloom, and corruption when all good sense tells the characters to turn back toward safety and salvation.

Players feel empowered and in charge when their characters win a fight, and letting them feel in charge is a serious breach of this rule. Characters don't need to lose every battle, but they must never win without paying a price. The death of friendly, helpful NPCs is a good place to start, because those NPCs are a resource that can't be replaced easily. Further, players with a conscience feel bad that they couldn't protect their friends.

Creating menace is not about killing characters or even threatening to kill characters. It's about keeping the players in a state of tension. To quote the *Ravenloft Campaign Setting*, "Death lasts only an instant, but horror can linger for a lifetime."

As an extreme option for building tension, you can track the characters' hit points instead of allowing players to do it. Players are told when their characters are bloodied (50 percent), failing (25 percent), and on their last legs (10 percent). This method should be used only if all players agree to it beforehand.

Rule 2: Set the Stage

Mood is everything. Remember those ridiculous ghost stories you heard around a campfire, in a tent in the back yard, or in someone's darkened basement? They wouldn't be scary at all if told in daylight and in comfortable, familiar surroundings.

Turn the lights as low as possible without making it impossible to play. Players need to read dice and character sheets. We don't recommend playing by candlelight, but table lamps that cast small circles of light while leaving the rest of the room in darkness can work.

Low lighting doesn't just establish a creepy mood. It also cuts distractions. With that same goal in mind, it's a good idea for everyone to silence their cellphones, shut down their laptops and tablets, unplug their earbuds, and turn off the TV. Everyone's attention should be on the game. That's good advice for any game session, but it's doubly important when you're trying to establish a horror mood.

Creepy music is the final bit of ambiance. Horror movie soundtracks are a great choice here. Turn it down low and put it on continual, random play. You might want to match specific tracks to specific scenes in the game. If that's your intent, then make notes of which tracks you want before the game starts so you don't break the flow while hunting for a CD sleeve or waste time scanning through the whole soundtrack for the one piece you want.

No matter how well you prepare and sell the experience, players can't be scared without their participation. The number one problem here is comedy. If players are cracking jokes at the table, singing show tunes, and making Monty Python references, the mood will never become dark and menacing. Comedy that comes from a character to relieve tension is a possible exception but even that can't go on for long.

This is a case where the direct approach is best. Have a short talk with the group before the adventure begins in which you point out, "Keep the comedy to a minimum or this won't work. Tonight is about fear, not laughs. If you cooperate, I'll do my best to stir up some genuine chills."

Despite the DM's best efforts, levity will still break out. That's just who we are as gamers. Here you can borrow a technique from film and kill the comedy with blood. The laughter should stop when something horrific happens: a devastating monster attack, a frightening message appears, or a new, unforeseen threat enters the scene.

Rule 3: Be the Storyteller

When people think about and talk about horror nowadays, they naturally veer toward the movies. Cinema is our preeminent horror medium. But a D&D game is not a movie, and the techniques that work in movies don't work in the game. Movies manipulate

visual effects and engineered sound to trigger emotions in viewers. A D&D game has only your voice.

A game is a storytelling medium, and you must use the tools of the storyteller to achieve results, not the tools of cinema.

- Speak in active voice.
- Cultivate a "stage voice" that can be heard without being loud.
- Keep your descriptions short. The real work of frightening the players takes places in the players' imaginations, not in your words. Let players ask for more information . . . if they dare.
- Take your time, and say what you mean. It's better to pause and select your words carefully than to back up and correct yourself.
- Verbal warnings are an important component in how humans learn to fear. Foreshadow the bad things that can happen to characters. A simple, straightforward way to do this is to question the players' statements of intent: Ask "Do you really want to do that?" and tack on a few vague but gruesome ways their plan can go wrong. Showing players what happened to others who went up against this foe—usually by letting characters find their corpses—lets players know the same fate awaits them.
- Fear is contagious. Once one player starts getting nervous, others may follow.

Rule 4: Make it Personal

Fear arises from threat. Freddy Krueger threatens to slash people to ribbons in their dreams, alien space pods threaten to replace people with emotionless simulacra, the mummy of Imhotep threatens to resurrect his lost love Ankhesenamun in the body of an innocent young woman.

In every case, the threat causes fear for one of two reasons: Either it's something gruesome that you don't want to see, or you care about the person who's threatened and don't want that person to be harmed. In the first case, the fear arises from revulsion, and it's all about us—we don't want to see something icky. Revulsion can be effective in movies, but it loses much of its shock value in verbal storytelling. The second case, where the viewer, reader, or listener's concern is for the victim's safety instead of his or her own, is the kind of fear we're interested in.

For this type of fear to work, players must care about their characters and the nonplayer characters in the story. That type of care comes only with time. Players need to spend enough time with their characters to develop their personalities and cement a relationship. It's also important to establish a few key leaders, colorful shop owners, helpful locals, and family members whose death, injury, or torment will stir feelings in the players. It's tough to scare players by threatening newly minted 1st-level characters. This fact is why one-shot games are more effective when they focus on shock scares and revulsion than on threats against characters.

Make no mistake: There will be tragedy. Never lose sight of the fact that the chief reason for getting the players emotionally invested in their characters and nonplayer characters is so they'll feel fear when those characters are threatened by evil and horror when evil claims someone. If no one suffers, there can be no horror and no fear. You must show no mercy and go easy on no one. The margin for error in this regard is zero.

Ideally, characters (and therefore players) should feel some responsibility when bad things happen. Every course of action must have positive and negative effects. No plan can save everyone. The villain's plot can never be completely foiled.

One way to accomplish this end is to arrange for the characters to be helpless—paralyzed, petrified, or polymorphed, for example—at a crucial moment when heroic intervention might have saved the day. This approach carries the risk frustrating more than frightening the players, so don't overdo it.

A better method can be found by remembering rule 1: Put evil in charge. Basic strategy dictates that during key events, the villain should threaten two things at once. The dead are emerging from their crypts and the orphanage has caught fire. Cultists are gathering for the moonrise ritual and the rays of the moon are triggering berserk frenzies among the townsfolk. The vampire can escape across the river only at midnight and that's the only time when the Remove Affliction ritual can release an infected victim from the vampire's curse. When the players confront a choice like this, they must either play god by choosing who to protect and who to forsake, along with facing all the ethical consequences that come with making that choice, or they must risk everything by splitting the party.

Players should be given every opportunity to second guess their choices. If characters warn the villagers to stay indoors because a monster is on the loose, whole families are bound to panic, flee, and be slaughtered on the road out of town. If characters keep quiet about the monster to prevent panic, young lovers are bound to slip away for a romantic meeting and be brutally murdered at the edge of town, along with a young boy searching for his lost dog and a kindly old man visiting his wife's grave. These are all people who would have stayed safely indoors if they'd been warned. Players should see their choices determining who survives and who suffers, whether or not the players intended them to.

The only way the story can reach a happy ending is if the characters force it. This is one of horror's defining differences from heroic adventure, where happy endings are the norm. A horror story is bound to turn out tragically for someone who deserved better. Evil is in charge, and it exacts a price.

That doesn't mean characters need to die, although they easily could. This potential is especially

true if the characters make poor choices. Evil shows no mercy.

When it's all done, even if the characters triumphed and evil was driven back, the ending should not be clear. Are all the monsters dead, or did one escape? The *Book of Pain* was sucked back through the portal before the gate closed, so how long will it be before another demented creature finds it and deciphers its secrets? Several characters were bitten, and they appear normal so far, but how long can the curse lie dormant? Characters and players should be left with unsettling questions when the dice are packed away and the books shelved.

In traditional gothic horror, despite a villain's monstrousness, it retains some element of tragically lost humanity. It might be almost impossible to detect beneath the hideous exterior, especially if the creature isn't known for having any humanity. That lack only makes a touch of tragedy a better twist to add.

Tragic villains are less common in modern horror. Villains in contemporary horror film and fiction tend to be pure evil, irredeemable by love or grace.

Either approach is fine. Neither one is incorrect. Design your villains to suit your players, or better yet, mix things up from one adventure to another so the players never know what to expect.

Rule 5: Break the Rules

A defining characteristic of the horror genre is that its antagonists tend to be supernatural, in that word's sense of "departing from what is usual or normal *esp* so as to appear to transcend the laws of nature." Almost everything in the *Monster Manual*® meets that definition one way or another. D&D characters face weird and terrifying foes on a daily basis, so yet another Far Realm horror or undead creeper is unlikely to rattle them. What's worse is that many players have all the monsters committed to memory, making such players impossible to surprise with by-the-book opponents.

Faced with this situation, "what is usual or normal" equates to "what is printed in a monster's official stat block." For a foe to seem supernatural, it doesn't just need to transcend the law of nature. It probably does that in spades already. Instead, it needs to transcend the law of the D&D rulebooks.

Reality in D&D is what the rules say it is. Just as we rely on our understanding of everyday reality to get through our jobs, school, and other commitments, players rely on D&D's rules for their sense of balance and security within the game. To defy reality, a creature must defy the rules. When evil can break the rules, it shakes the players' faith in their grip on the game's reality.

In short, it spooks them.

The villain of a horror adventure should never be taken straight from a published monster book. The villain must be able to surprise the players with capabilities they didn't expect and weren't prepared for even in the context of a fantasy world or it isn't supernatural. It should be twisted somehow. Existing powers can be altered or exchanged for different ones. Two or more monsters could be combined into something new.

The second way to step away from the rules is to set aside the dice when they aren't truly necessary. Every time players roll dice, they have an opportunity to take charge and dispel the aura of uncertainty and despair that's been built up. Every time the DM rolls dice, bad luck threatens to spoil what should be a frightening moment. Both possibilities violate rule 1—put evil in charge!

When the villain first leaps from the shadows onto an unsuspecting player character, its attack hits. In a normal, heroic D&D adventure, allowing an ambushing monster to miss its attack is fine, because the players are supposed to feel like heroes. But in horror, when the "master" unsheathes its claws, those claws must draw blood. Nothing deflates an atmosphere of menace more thoroughly than allowing the villain to look weak and ineffective from the outset.

This advice is not a blanket prohibition against dice. The D&D game is a game, and players come to the table expecting they'll get to roll them bones. But dice are inherently unpredictable, and they can betray you at the worst possible moment. After you decide that the top goal is establishing a mood of menace and fear, then anything likely to interfere with that dramatic objective, such as remaining rigidly true to D&D's established probability graph, needs to take second seat.

After the initial shock of a sudden assault is past, in the second and subsequent rounds (if the monster sticks around that long), some of its attacks can miss without spoiling the tension. But in the first round, when everyone is slightly off-balance from the onslaught and uncertainty about what this creature can do is at its peak, the villain's attacks must connect.

If exercising this much DM power over the rules bothers you, then here's an alternative: give the monster a "lurker lite" power that turns surprise-round or first-round misses into hits. Then it will be "official."

Rule 6: Watch Your Speed

When the pressure is on, force players to make rapid decisions. If characters are in a situation where they have only a few seconds to make a decision, don't allow players to debate much longer than that.

This is especially true in situations where there's no time or opportunity for characters themselves to talk before acting. We are social creatures, and being isolated makes most people uneasy. This is true even when that isolation lasts mere seconds. Having to make a quick decision with only fragmentary knowledge of the consequences makes peoples' palms sweat. Those who hesitate are lost.

This is a case where your knowledge of your players is important. Some players make quick decisions all the time, while others are seemingly incapable of doing so. Their characters might be action heroes with catlike reflexes, but the player won't order lunch until every alternative has been studied. It's okay to make allowances for such players, but only up to the point where cutting them more slack means disrupting the tension at the table.

Let's say you know one player always needs more time than anyone else to make a decision for his character, Galahad the Impetuous, and he never starts the process until it's his turn. When a split-second decision is needed, that player should be the first or second person you call on. When the player hesitate, say, "I'll get back to you. Have an answer for me when I do." Then collect everyone else's reactions before coming back to the player, who's now had 15 or 20 seconds to think about it and has heard everyone else's choice. If he has an answer, great. If not, an intense scene can't go on hold while he turns his mental gears. Galahad the Impetuous hesitates and does nothing.

If you're uncomfortable with this approach, here are two alternatives. First, you can simplify the situation by giving the player just two or three options to choose from. For example, Galahad could jump out of the way, draw a weapon and attack, or snatch a magic item off his belt and ready it for use. The player must choose one immediately, or Galahad hesitates. Second, if the player doesn't react quickly enough, you can have the player roll a saving throw or make a Dexterity or Wisdom check for Galahad, depending on the situation. If it succeeds, Galahad reacts in a moderately effective way. If it fails, he hesitates. Technically, the die roll option could be available to anyone who wants to use it, but a player who makes a quick choice should be allowed to skip a die roll that could force a different decision.

Make sure you reach an agreement on the use of this technique before the game starts. When characters' actions are dictated or narrowly restricted by circumstances, players are freed from blame for the

bad things that happen as a result of their choices. That's not frightening. Players in that situation might feel like victims, but they won't feel the kind of fear that makes their palms sweat and their skin crawl.

When time is not pressing, let players talk, in or out of character. If you've done things right, then the more they discuss, the more they'll become aware of all the important questions they can't answer.

As in any D&D session, confusing lulls are bad. It's fine to let players discuss their options at length when that discussion is driven by their unease over choosing a course of action that could have bad consequences. Letting the players talk because they don't know what else to do is different. When players are stuck, offer some options.

Alternatively, if the group hits a wall, you can't go very wrong by having something creepy happen. If nothing else, it gives the players something new to talk about and gets their minds off whatever stalled them previously.

Behind every decision about pacing should be rule 1: Put evil in charge. Don't trigger a confrontation with the villain too soon. It clears away the fog of mystery around the villain and gives the players confidence that they can survive a fight against the master. Henchmen are especially useful in this regard. When used carefully, henchmen aren't just a momentary threat. They test the heroes' strength without risking everything and can demonstrate the villain's power without revealing crucial truths.

It's tempting to stage the adventure's climax against just one terrible villain, like Dracula or Pennywise, but that's a risky play. Solo creatures are tricky to manage. All too often, they can be neutered in combat by clever player groups. It's much better to provide the villain with plenty of minions and powerful lieutenants willing to obey and sacrifice their lives (willingly or otherwise) for the master. Leave the powerful solo foes until you've mastered the horror genre and can manage them with confidence.

Tricks and Manipulations

After you have the rules of horror down, they can be supplemented with a few additional, lesser techniques.

Shock. Horror movies rely heavily on shock to get viewers to jump in their seats. Shock is harder to pull off at your dining room table, but it can be done. A monster that attacks by surprise, delivers just one or two devastating blows, and then escapes before anyone can counterattack is shocking. So is finding a valued ally or loved one brutally murdered in a place that was thought to be safe. It's vital not to overdo shock and to know when to back away from sensitive subjects. Making someone briefly uncomfortable is OK; upsetting someone is not. Again, previous player agreement to the technique is important.

Dreams. Don't rely much on dreams. They aren't very scary or even very effective in roleplaying. The best use for dreams is fueling uncertainty and the fear that players don't understand the big picture. A dream should never reveal concrete information. At best, a dream provides an enigmatic clue that can be interpreted several ways, most of which lead to even greater danger.

No Exit. At some point, characters can push so far into darkness that no route leads back to the light. Every path that hints at safety only twists further into danger. Every answer characters find indicates that the threat is deeper, more malignant, and more inscrutable than they thought. This nihilistic theme is more common in cosmic horror than in gothic horror. Nihilism doesn't mesh well with D&D's generally heroic outlook. The two can be combined to great effect with the right group of like-minded players.

Putting It All Together

Even on your best day, you're not likely to trigger more than the mildest sensations of fear in D&D players: sweaty palms, slightly elevated heart rate. The most likely effect is that players will start to hesitate to take bold action because they dread that whatever they do will lead to more evil outcomes. Those are moments of roleplaying gold.

In every case, learn from experience. Your first attempts at establishing an atmosphere of dread won't be as effective as you'd like. Analyze what did and didn't work, take those lessons to heart, and every new session will be creepier than the last.

About the Author

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Codex of Betrayal:
Amon the Wolf

By Tim Eagon

Illustration by Beth Trott

Betrayal defines the history of the Nine Hells, so it is unusual for any devil, much less a member of the diabolic aristocracy, to demonstrate genuine feelings of loyalty and obedience to another. Amon the Wolf, an exiled Duke of Hell, is one such fiend. Amon originally served He Who Was as a scout, fewterer, and huntsman, but his unbridled admiration for the archangel Geryon set him apart from his fellow angels. When given the opportunity, Amon eagerly volunteered to join Geryon's army and served him with distinction. His devotion to his general soon eclipsed any loyalty he still felt for his deity.

After Asmodeus rebelled against He Who Was, Amon followed his general's lead and remained nominally loyal to his god, but showed his true colors and damned himself after witnessing Geryon's treachery at the Battle for the Bridge of Storms. On the battlefield, surrounded by the corpses of the angels he just betrayed, Amon swore an oath of eternal loyalty to Geryon. He served throughout the remainder of the revolt as Geryon's most trusted and able lieutenant.

The Price of Loyalty

Following Asmodeus's victory over He Who Was, the terrible divine curse that afflicted all the rebellious angels transformed Amon into a savage, wolf-headed humanoid. Not even that trauma could shake his faith in Geryon, and he remained a staunchly loyal vassal. When Asmodeus deposed Levistus for murdering Asmodeus's consort, Bensozia, he installed Geryon as ruler of Stygia, Baator's frozen fifth layer. Amon joined Geryon there and assumed the title of duke.

Much later, during the Reckoning, the diabolic civil war that ultimately tightened Asmodeus's grip on the Hells, Amon remained loyal to Geryon—and, by extension, to Asmodeus. Amon expected that Asmodeus would reward Geryon for his fidelity. When Asmodeus ousted Geryon and restored Levistus to his former position as ruler of Stygia, Amon was outraged. Amon declined to join his exiled master in Tytherion. Instead, he remained behind in Stygia and swore an oath of vengeance on Geryon's behalf.

Amon now stalks Avernus, the first of the Nine Hells, and other astral dominions. He hunts perpetually for the agents of his master's enemies, especially servants of the treacherous archdevils that emerged seemingly unscathed from the Reckoning. Amon hopes to one day slay these traitors and use his newfound power to persuade Asmodeus to restore Geryon to his former position or to an even greater one. Amon has cut a bloody swath across Avernus, always accompanied by a pack of Stygian winter wolves. Though he is far from achieving his goal of restoring Geryon's rule, Amon's depredations have earned him a new sobriquet—the Slayer.

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Appearance and Personality

Amon looks like a muscular, 9-foot-tall human with bronze skin and the head of a massive gray wolf. His blue eyes glisten like ice. Amon's only garment is a simple brown loincloth; extreme temperatures don't bother him, and he is vain and proud of his chiseled physique. The weapon he wields is a huge, black iron mace with a head shaped like a snarling wolf. When he swings it, air rushes through masterfully forged hollow spaces to emit a howling sound that intensifies to a thunderous, bone-shivering snarl.

Amon delights in tormenting and terrifying his prey. He himself is tireless, so he pursues victims relentlessly, making hit-and-run attacks to injure them, slow their flight, and deepen their fear and pain. Eventually his prey collapses from exhaustion and lies helpless before him.

As one of the most skillful trackers and hunters in the Nine Hells, Amon has pursued and ambushed countless enemies and evaded many more, all while surviving the harsh terrain. He is more at home in the Hells' deadly wilderness than its murderous courts, and he can communicate with any predatory beast. He prefers their company to those of his fellow devils, the only exception being Geryon. Most of Amon's peers regard him as a brute, but his keen senses and predatory instinct have enabled him to sniff out many schemes against Geryon and dodge every enemy.

Amon's attitude toward betrayal goes well beyond the typical devil's intolerance. He delights in tearing out the throats of those he regards as traitors or as unfaithful to their word or to their duty. When Amon makes a bargain, he keeps its terms absolutely. Although he never lies directly, he appreciates the usefulness of silent deceit and has been known to lie through omission.

Amon cares for little but the interests and position of his liege. His devotion to Geryon parallels the love of a hound for its master: unshakable even in the face of cruelty. When contemplating any course of action, the first thing Amon considers is what would be best for Geryon.

The tragedy in this tale is that Geryon would seldom agree with Amon's judgments, and Amon does not recognize that his actions seldom serve Geryon's agenda above Amon's obsession with revenge. Although Geryon's fortunes are at a low point, the Broken Beast is a master at the politics of the Hells. For all his brutish usefulness, Amon is unable to keep pace with Geryon's mind or to trace the many pathways of Geryon's schemes.

Amon the Wolf **Level 27 Elite Skirmisher**
Large immortal humanoid (devil) XP 22,000

HP 420; **Bloodied** 210 **Initiative** +25
AC 41, **Fortitude** 39, **Reflex** 40, **Will** 39 **Perception** +23
Speed 10, climb 10, fly 10 Blindsight 5, darkvision
Resist 25 cold, 25 fire
Saving Throws +2; **Action Points** 1

Traits

☼ **Beast Blood ✦ Aura** 10
When a beast or magical beast ally in the aura drops an enemy in the aura below 1 hit point, that ally gains 1 action point that it must expend on its next turn or lose.

Dogged
If Amon is dominated, stunned, or weakened, he is instead dazed for the same duration. While dazed, on each of his turns, Amon can take a minor action and a move or standard action.

Regeneration
Amon regains 15 hit points whenever he starts his turn and has at least 1 hit point. When he takes damage from a silvered weapon, his regeneration does not function on his next turn.

Wolf Footing
If Amon is immobilized, restrained, or slowed, he is instead slowed for the same duration. Difficult terrain does not cost Amon extra movement.

Standard Actions

⨭ **Bite ✦ At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +32 vs. AC
Hit: 3d8 + 21 damage, or 4d8 + 23 damage to a prone target. If Amon has combat advantage against the target, the target falls prone.

⨭ **Howling Mace** (thunder, weapon) **✦ At-Will**
Attack: Melee 2 (one creature); +32 vs. AC.
Hit: 2d10 +23 damage, or 3d10 + 23 damage to a prone target. If Amon scores a critical hit, the target also takes ongoing 15 thunder damage and is dazed (save ends both).

Wolf Tactics ✦ At-Will
Effect: Amon uses *howling mace* and *bite*. He can also shift up to half his speed, splitting that movement among the moments before, between, and after his attacks.

Move Actions

Teleport (teleportation) **✦ Recharge** ⚅ ⚄ ⚃
Effect: Amon teleports up to 10 squares.

Minor Actions

⨳ **Gaze of Despair** (fear) **✦ Recharge** when Amon's turn ends after he uses *wolf gaze*
Attack: Close blast 5 (one creature in the blast); +30 vs. Will
Hit: The target falls prone. If it does not fall prone, it is instead immobilized until the end of Amon's next turn.

⨳ **Wolf Gaze** (charm) **✦ Recharge** when Amon's turn ends after he uses *gaze of despair*
Attack: Close blast 5 (one creature in the blast); +30 vs. Will
Hit: The target is dazed until the end of Amon's next turn. If it is not dazed, it is instead immobilized until the end of Amon's next turn.

Triggered Actions

Ice Shield ✦ At-Will
Trigger: An attack hits Amon on his turn.
Effect (Immediate Interrupt): Amon gains +5 to all defenses until the end of his current turn.

Skills Insight +23, Intimidate +26
Str 26 (+21) **Dex** 30 (+23) **Wis** 20 (+18)
Con 24 (+20) **Int** 20 (+18) **Cha** 26 (+21)
Alignment evil **Languages** Common, Supernal
Equipment heavy mace

Servants and Followers

A pack of thirteen Stygian winter wolves accompanies Amon everywhere. These canines resemble their

mortal cousins, but they are more malevolent, rigidly hierarchical, and powerful.

When Geryon became ruler of Stygia, Amon explored the entirety of his master's new domain. During this journey, he encountered the layer's most powerful winter wolf. The two skirmished for three days before Amon emerged victorious. Instead of taking the wolf's pelt as a trophy, Amon demanded its obedience. The bested wolf had no choice but to acquiesce, and thus Amon took his place atop the wolves' hierarchy. Now, every Stygian winter wolf owes Amon its fealty, and the vanquished alpha has become Amon's loyal companion.

This wolf is called Soulfang, and it is as large as a horse. Soulfang's frigid bite turns its victims to ice, and its wintry breath conjures Stygia's terrible, soul-numbing blizzards. In many ways, Soulfang's relationship to Amon mimics Amon's relationship to Geryon; the wolf is utterly loyal and follows Amon's orders without question. Not even powerful magic could force it to betray its master. Soulfang acts as Amon's second-in-command over the pack of winter wolves and is a brutal disciplinarian.

The other winter wolves are smaller and less powerful than Soulfang but are just as loyal to Amon, even if they openly grumble about the uncomfortable warmth of Avernus. When the pack loses members, Amon replenishes its ranks through dark rituals that summon more wolves from the depths of Stygia. The winter wolves there vie for the honor of serving their master, and Amon calls only the strongest to join him.

Despite once being a duke, Amon has few allies among his fellow devils. A small number of osyluths remain in his service or in his debt. He maintains good relations with Stygia's independent-minded ice devils, but they are rarely in a position to help Amon. Ironically, most of his diabolic aid originates with his sworn enemies, the archdevils. In the cutthroat politics of Hell, rival archdevils sometimes strike at each other by secretly assisting Amon's vendetta. They supply him with some of the information, access, and material he needs.

A few mortals dedicate themselves to Amon, especially those seeking power over predatory beasts. In addition, numerous lycanthropes, especially werewolves, revere him.

Soulfang, Amon's Wolf **Level 25 Controller**
Large immortal magical beast, winter wolf XP 7,000

HP 230; **Bloodied** 115 **Initiative** +21
AC 39, **Fortitude** 37, **Reflex** 38, **Will** 36 **Perception** +24
Speed 10 (ice walk) Darkvision
Immune cold

Traits

Constant Companion
Soulfang cannot target Amon with an attack. If forced to do so, Soulfang instead loses the action he was using to make the attack.

Standard Actions

Bite (cold, necrotic) ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +30 vs. AC
Hit: 3d8 + 9 damage, or 4d8 + 9 damage to a prone target, and ongoing 10 cold and necrotic damage (save ends). If Soulfang has combat advantage against the target, the target falls prone.

Stygian Breath (cold, necrotic) ✦ **Recharge** ⚄ ⁞⁞
Attack: Close blast 5 (enemies in the blast); +28 vs. Reflex
Hit: 4d8 + 7 cold and necrotic damage, and the target is immobilized until the end of Soulfang's next turn.
Miss: Half damage.
Effect: Until the end of Soulfang's next turn, the ground in the area is difficult terrain for creatures without ice walk.

Triggered Actions

Freeze Blood and Soul ✦ **Encounter**
Trigger: An enemy is bloodied after being hit by Soulfang's attack.
Effect (Free Action): The triggering enemy is petrified (save ends) as solid ice.
Each Failed Saving Throw: The enemy loses 1 healing surge. If the enemy has no healing surge to lose, it dies and the petrification becomes permanent.

Str 26 (+20) **Dex** 29 (+21) **Wis** 24 (+19)
Con 22 (+18) **Int** 13 (+13) **Cha** 14 (+14)
Alignment evil **Languages** Supernal

Stygian Winter Wolf **Level 25 Minion Skirmisher**
Large immortal magical beast XP 1,750

HP 1; a missed attack never damages a minion. **Initiative** +23
AC 39, **Fortitude** 37, **Reflex** 38, **Will** 36 **Perception** +23
Speed 10 (ice walk) Darkvision
Immune cold

Standard Actions

Bite (cold, necrotic) ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +30 vs. AC
Hit: 10 damage plus 5 cold and necrotic damage.

Stygian Breath (cold, necrotic) ✦ **Encounter**
Attack: Close blast 5 (enemies in the blast); +28 vs. Reflex
Hit: 12 cold and necrotic damage, and the target is slowed (save ends).

Str 25 (+19) **Dex** 28 (+21) **Wis** 23 (+18)
Con 22 (+18) **Int** 9 (+11) **Cha** 10 (+12)
Alignment evil **Languages** Supernal

Amon's Relationship with Geryon

Amon still regards himself as Geryon's most trusted and faithful servant. Despite his protestations of loyalty, his relationship with his master is strained at best. Geryon understands that Amon's vendetta is a colossal waste of time and effort. He would prefer that Amon abandon it and join him in Tytherion, where Geryon could direct Amon's effort toward uncovering the secret reasons for Geryon's unexpected downfall (Geryon's obsession with this idea is discussed in "Codex of Betrayal: Geryon," in *Dungeon* 176).

Amon has not communicated directly with Geryon for centuries. At some level, Amon has begun to suspect that if the two spoke, Geryon would call an end to Amon's unending quest for vengeance. Amon is certain that what he is doing is best for his lord, even if Geryon doesn't appreciate it. The fact that Geryon hasn't contacted Amon through messengers only reinforces his belief. As to why Geryon allows Amon's single-minded mission to continue, only Geryon knows that answer.

Amon and the Lords of the Nine

Amon's ultimate goal is to slay all the archdevils who participated in the Reckoning. For now, he concentrates his effort on Baalzebul and Levistus, and to a lesser extent, Belial and Mammon. Amon's relationships with each of the Lords of the Nine Hells are summarized below.

Bel: Amon doesn't trust Bel since he overthrew his mistress Zariel during the Reckoning. She, however, was one of Baalzebul's allies while Bel stayed loyal to Asmodeus, so Amon gives him a pass. Bel has provided covert assistance to Amon on several occasions when Amon was working against Bel's enemies, and Bel will continue to offer support as long as Amon's activities do not threaten him, the Dark Eight, or Asmodeus. Bel commands his patrols to give Amon a wide berth and let him pass through Avernus unmolested.

Dispater: Amon believes that Dispater and his minions are too vigilant and too strong for him to confront directly. Dispater feeds bits of information about his rival Baalzebul to Amon, and finds Amon's ability to bypass Dis's defenses worrisome.

Mammon: Amon despises Mammon for his constant duplicity, while Mammon is jealous of Amon's burgeoning relationship with Glasya, who was once Mammon's lover. Because Mammon has few other allies in Baator, he regularly uses Amon to strike at his peers.

Belial and Fernia: Belial's hatred of Levistus should make him a natural ally of Amon, but it is overshadowed by his designs on Stygia and his alliance with Baalzebul to make him one of Amon's primary targets. Thanks to Glasya's influence, Amon ignores Fernia and her interests.

Levistus: Of all the archdevils, Amon directs his strongest hatred and most vicious attacks against Levistus and his minions. In particular, he relishes traveling to the mortal world to slay Levistus's favored cultists. Afterward, he delivers their heads to Levistus's frozen court. In return, Levistus has placed a sizable bounty on Amon's head, and his minions have waged a war of eradication against Stygia's disloyal wolf population, to little effect.

Glasya: Despite persistent rumors that she instigated the Reckoning, Amon maintains good relations with Glasya because they share a mutual hatred of Levistus and Mammon. She is the only archdevil who assists Amon openly—at least when Levistus is his target. Glasya would like to have Amon as her personal minion and plaything; toward that goal, she seductively plays on Amon's vanity, hoping to drive a wedge between him and Geryon. Malbolge is a safe haven for Amon.

Baalzebul: Because Baalzebul led the faction that started the Reckoning, Amon blames him above all others for Geryon's downfall and persistently attacks Baalzebul's interests and allies. Amon's particular hatred for Baalzebul is well known, and Baalzebul's enemies find innumerable ways to manipulate Amon's fury against their common foe. Baalzebul responds with a torrent of disinformation and dissemblance to protect himself and steer Amon's effort toward Baalzebul's own enemies.

Mephistopheles: Mephistopheles is so busy scheming to supplant Asmodeus that he can't spare much thought for Amon. Like Dispater, he supplies Amon with information about Baalzebul when he can. This could be shortsighted on the part of Mephistopheles, as Amon believes that Mephistopholes's position as ruler of Cania is a better fit for his lord Geryon.

Asmodeus: Amon refuses to attack Asmodeus. He fears Asmodeus, as any sane creature would, but mostly he respects Geryon's continued loyalty to him. Amon is beneath the notice of Asmodeus, except for those rare occasions when the Lord of Nessus uses him to teach Mephistopheles or Baalzebul a lesson.

Using Amon in Your Campaign

Because of his unique status, Amon would make an excellent antagonist in an epic-level campaign, but he can also be an unlikely ally to characters who oppose the schemes of the Lords of the Nine Hells. Because he always honors his agreements and his strategies are relatively predictable, Amon is one of the few devils who makes a trustworthy ally. Weighing against that is the revulsion that most good-aligned heroes will feel toward Amon's horrific violence and cruelty. Characters who betray him, or who even plan to betray him (Amon is always on the alert for signs of betrayal), gain a tireless enemy.

Here are further suggestions on how to use Amon in your campaign.

Amon as Enemy

Unless characters work for an archdevil (infernal pact warlocks may find themselves especially in danger), Amon is likely to ignore a group of mortal adventurers until they interfere with his vendetta or oppose Geryon in some fashion. Should player characters come into conflict with Amon, their first encounter is likely to be a quick ambush that ends as suddenly as it began. Afterward, Amon and his pack continue to be a constant, menacing presence on the horizon, harassing the party and driving them ever forward until they tire, which is when he moves in for the kill.

Hunting Party: Amon sharpens his tracking skill and satisfies his bloodlust by hunting creatures he comes across during his travels, but only if they present a suitable challenge. If the characters are trekking across Avernus and Amon detects them, they might attract his interest if they appear to be worthy quarry and he has no other pressing matters to attend to. After Amon commences the hunt, he will not rest until he has taken the hides of all his prey.

Infernal Trickery: If the characters find that Amon is stalking them, it's possible that one of their diabolic enemies (or their minions) has fed Amon evidence against them. Another possibility is that the characters were unknowingly working for an archdevil and Amon uncovered the connection between them. In this case, he is sure to reveal the true nature of their infernal patron during combat by mocking the characters for their gullibility. If the characters can persuade Amon of their innocence and their usefulness to him, they would gain a powerful ally; otherwise, he continues hunting them for sport. Under no circumstance will he ally with or even show mercy to anyone working for Levistus.

Call Forth Vengeance: Using ancient rituals, powerful mortals can summon Amon to the natural world to exact retribution on someone; Amon refuses to respond for any other reason. The price to one's body and soul is steep, but desperate NPC enemies of epic-level player characters may be willing to pay it. Once called, Amon has a week to complete his task, and he will not rest until it is finished. Amon's hatred of betrayal is so strong that there are legends of him traveling to the mortal world on his own volition to dispatch notorious traitors. Player characters who double-cross a powerful patron or ally may find it prudent to watch out for the Wolf.

Amon as Ally

Amon can be even more interesting as an ally than as an enemy.

Dealing with a Devil: Amon is surprisingly dim by the standards of powerful devils, but he makes up for his moderate intelligence with wolflike cunning. When his goals overlap with those of mortals, he readily forms alliances—provided he trusts his potential allies. And though Amon seldom realizes his own manipulation by more potent beings, he is no stranger to manipulating others into doing his bidding. Powerful but expendable creatures such as mortal adventurers are especially useful for probing the lethal defenses of well-protected targets or distracting them while Amon strikes from a different direction. If characters oppose one of Amon's enemies—Mammon, Belial, Levistus, or Baalzebul in particular—he might even seek them out to forge a long-term alliance, and he is receptive to overtures along those same lines from powerful creatures.

A Guide to Hell: Few if any creatures know Baator and the Outer Torments better than Amon. He is familiar with all of the secret passages and hidden portals that connect the various layers, he can easily slip through each layer's defenses, and he can survive off their harsh landscapes while avoiding their many hazards. He is less adept in urban areas, with the exception of Tantlin, Stygia's largest city. Amon can be hired as a guide to nearly any destination in the Nine Hells; he will lead a party through the safest or quickest route (their choice). Negotiating an agreeable price can be tricky. Amon is not interested in souls, treasure, or magic. Typically, he demands that clients first undertake a mission that will further his vendetta.

The Information Broker: Because so many devils supply Amon with information, he is an excellent resource on the subjects of infernal politics, the schemes of his fellow devils, and Baator's defenses. He is willing to trade information, though his prices are steep; the characters must supply him with information of equal value (which would be hard for them to obtain) or they must carry out a dangerous task of his choosing. Information-seekers must sift carefully through what they learn; Amon receives much false information along with the truth, in the archdevils' unending plays to manipulate him.

An Audience with Evil: Unless the characters are powerful forces of evil, Geryon is unlikely to grant them an audience. The exiled archdevil might speak with them, however, if Amon guided them to Geryon's court in Tytherion and vouched for them in Geryon's presence. The characters' reason for speaking to Geryon would need to be compelling to get Amon to abandon his vendetta. Nothing short of protecting Geryon's safety, ending his banishment, or elevating his status will do. In return for such help, Amon would demand that the characters continue his vendetta. If they fail, they must forfeit their souls to him.

About the Author

Tim Eagon is a freelance writer living in Madison, Wisconsin. He has written several articles, including "Ecology of the Hengeyokai," "The Winterguard of Cendriane," and "Creature Incarnations: Hordelings."

Bazaar of the Bizarre: Treasures from the Far Realm

By Eytan Bernstein

Illustrations by Jim Nelson

Do you fear the dark? Do you hide under the covers, praying that the faceless monster in your closet won't hear the chattering of your teeth? Do you avoid dangling your feet over the edge of your bed, lest the thousand-mawed beast lurking below devour your toes? Have you stared into the night sky, terrified that the twinkling stars might be the eyes of immensely powerful beings hungry for your soul?

Good! You still retain caution and a healthy sense of fear of the unknown. If you fall into this category, cease and desist! The treasures described in this tome are meant only for those who have moved beyond rational fear.

Final warning! Go no further! Glimpsing even the least of these abominations is enough to fracture the sanity of the most well-grounded scholar.

You have been warned!

—Rajim, the mad monk of Memnon

Not all magic items are the creations of mortals. Sometimes, gods imbue artifacts with their own divine essence to exert influence over the mortal world. Angels and demons forge devices for use in the eternal battles of good against evil and law against chaos. Powerful fey and ancient spirits draw upon nature to create potent relics and mystic treasures to suit their own purposes.

Not all beings of power have understandable motives even in the normal world, and the desires of

REMOVING FAR REALM ITEMS

The items presented in this article cannot be permanently destroyed, and their owners cannot willingly discard them. If such an item is removed from its owner by extraordinary means, it magically reappears in the owner's possession within 1d4 days.

To discard one of these items, the user must undergo a modified Remove Affliction ritual. This version of the ritual takes 8 hours and requires an Arcana check (at a -5 penalty) rather than a Heal check. If the check result is lower than a moderate check DC of the target's level, the item is not removed unless the target died from the ritual. Furthermore, based on the Arcana check result, all ritual participants suffer the same effect as the target.

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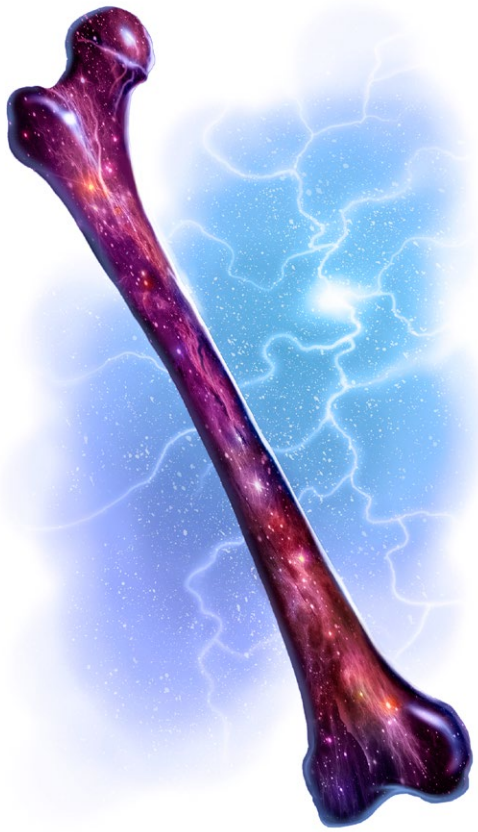
Far Realm entities are still more alien. When such a being creates an item, the end result is seldom beneficial to denizens of the Material Plane. In fact, such items forever change those who use them—and often those unfortunate enough to be nearby as well.

The items presented here are the creations of Far Realm beings.



Bone Scepter of Zceryll

Zceryll was a warlock obsessed with immortality. She was an irredeemable megalomaniac, valuing her life and youth above all else. She committed unspeakable atrocities in her quest to cheat death, including sacrificing friends and family to unknowable beings, grafting appendages of aberrations to her flesh, and unleashing plagues of madness. Scholars say that she eventually achieved her desire: When she died, she ascended into the Far Realm, becoming a being of pure depravity.

Zceryll's Agenda

Zceryll never achieved the kind of immortality she craved. She seeks to hasten the demise of any creature that possesses her scepter. If the scepter's wielder dies and is subsequently raised, Zceryll returns to the world alongside him or her.

Bone Scepter of Zceryll Heroic Level

This scepter looks like a human femur composed of darkness, dotted with nebulae and stars that mimic the movements of their counterparts in the night sky.

Artifact: Implement (rod)
Enhancement Bonus: +2 to attack rolls and damage rolls
Critical: +2d8 psychic damage, and the target is dazed (save ends).

Properties

✦ You cannot reduce psychic damage you take in any way.
✦ When you hit a creature with an attack using this scepter, until the end of the encounter, the creature cannot reduce psychic damage it takes in any way.
✦ Once per turn, when you hit a creature with an attack using this scepter, you and it take 5 psychic damage.

Attack (Implement, Psychic) ✦ **Daily** (Standard Action)

Attack: Ranged 20 (one creature); Intelligence, Wisdom, or Charisma vs. Will
Hit: The target is stunned and takes ongoing 5 psychic (save ends both).
Each Failed Saving Throw: You take 10 psychic damage.

The effects of Zceryll's return are up to DM. At the very least, she achieves true immortality and ushers in a new era of aberrant depravity.

Krylanthi Cloak

Thousands of years ago, the ancient city of Krylanth, capital of Az-Kiral, dominated a small island. Az-Kiral had roads, calendars, and inventions that dwarfed those existing in the rest of the world. But an attempt by one of the residents to contact Nihal, the Serpent Star, changed the empire's destiny from one of wicked greatness to annihilation. Nihal's serpents ripped the city from this reality, leaving behind a nightmare landscape of magma pools, ruined buildings, and overgrown jungle that still persists today.

The island that remains behind in this world is a volcanic wasteland from which few return. No traces remain of Az-Kiral's magnificent civilization, or the wonders its people wrought. Those who can glimpse the Far Realm may see the ancient city of Krylanth floating in the maddening depths without a physical anchor.

The *Krylanthi cloak*, which once belonged to the emperor of Az-Kiral, still lies in the worldly ruins of the old city. The cloak was not known to have magical powers in its time, but it now serves as a connection with Nihal.

Nihal's Agenda

Nihal is a hungry star, and it uses the *Krylanthi cloak* to siphon spiritual energy from the wearer and those nearby. The cloak eats away at the wearer's sanity through dark dreams and weird experiences, such as a crawling sensation on the skin while wearing the garment.

Using the cloak's powers allows those affected to move into a non-space that provides a view of the Far Realm. Nihal devours the soul of any creature that dies while wearing the cloak, resulting in the wearer's permanent annihilation.

Krylanthi Cloak Paragon Level

This cloak of multicolored snakeskin glitters in bright light, but its wearer casts no shadow.

Artifact: Neck slot item
Enhancement Bonus: +4 to Fortitude, Reflex, and Will

Properties

- ✦ You are considered to be an aberrant creature in addition to your normal type.
- ✦ You gain a +4 item bonus to Diplomacy checks made against aberrant creatures.
- ✦ You have an aura 5. Any creature in the aura, including you, that becomes bloodied cannot spend action points, healing surges, or power points (save ends). A creature that saves against this property is immune to it until the end of the encounter.

Utility Power ✦ Encounter (Free Action)

Trigger: You roll initiative.
Effect: You lose a healing surge and are removed from play. At the start of your first turn, you appear in an unoccupied square within 20 squares of your original location and adjacent to an enemy. You are considered to be bloodied until the end of your next turn.

Utility Power ✦ Encounter (Move Action)

Effect: You and an ally within 5 squares of you each lose a healing surge and are removed from play. At the start of your next turn, you each reappear in the space the other left, or the nearest unoccupied space. You are both considered to be bloodied until the end of your next turn.

Eye of Tkhaluujin

Tkhaluujin, known as the Cephalopocalypse, was a gargantuan, one-eyed, squidlike entity that traveled the planes, gorging on matter in its path. Embodying hunger in its purest form, Tkhaluujin experienced a insatiable need to devour everything in existence.

The Cephalopocalypse met its end when it unwittingly devoured Gaia, a sentient land mass. Upon ingesting her, it became wracked with Gaia's thoughts. Gaia dominated its every waking moment, and eventually forced it to spiral down into the oceanic abyss, never to be seen again.

Most historians claim that this event completely obliterated Tkhaluujin, but some whisper that a small piece of it survived. A rare few actually know the true fate of the Cephalopocalypse.

Tkhaluujin's Agenda

The Cephalopocalypse has no conscious agenda. It is attracted to obsessed beings, regardless of the nature of their obsession. It lives vicariously through such creatures, craving the rush of obsession that it can no longer feel, having lost its physical form.

DMing the Eye

Tkhaluujin is attracted to passionate individuals who have strong interests and vices, and it temporarily turns quirks into obsessions. You can use the eye as an opportunity to enhance roleplaying opportunities related to these elements. Alternatively, you could use the eye to amplify the tension of situations in which normal emotions—such as greed or attraction—might be exploited. Furthermore, you can employ its properties to reveal information you want the characters to have.

The eye provides a built-in reward for an owner who pursues the object of his or her desire, but you can grant any reward you feel is properly motivating to the player. For example, the eye might remove a condition that prevents the character's pursuit of a desired object or outcome.

Tkhaluujin's single eye was the only piece of the creature that survived its melding with Gaia. The eye does not function alone, but attaches to another magic item, giving Tkhaluujin a conduit into the owner's emotions.

After it has established a connection, the Cephalopocalypse exerts its influence over the item's wielder to feed its unceasing hunger, amplifying whatever obsessions the possessor may have. The affected item gains a few additional powers but functions in all other ways as a normal magic item of its type. In addition to benefiting from the item's new powers, the wielder becomes obsessed with keeping it. If the item is taken, the eye forces the original wielder to expend all necessary resources to reclaim it.

Eye of Tkhaluujin — Epic Level

The weird eye on this item seems to pierce to the soul with its alien gaze, instilling burning intensity into any desire.

Artifact: Wondrous item

Properties

✦ You gain blindsight 3.

✦ You gain telepathy 5.

✦ At any time, the DM can amplify your desires, allowing you to sense something you like or want is nearby. The sense might be general or exact. When you sense an object of your desire in this way, you benefit from seeking to acquire or interact with it.

Utility Power ✦ Encounter (No Action)

Trigger: You successfully interact with an object of desire you learned about because of this item's final property.

Effect: You regain one expended healing surge or use of one encounter power besides this one. If you expended an action point in pursuit of the object, you also gain one action point and can spend it during the same encounter.

Attack Power (Charm) ✦ **Daily** (Free Action)

Trigger: The DM informs you of an object of desire, and the first action you take on your next turn is to pursue acquisition of or interaction with that object.

Attack: Ranged 10 (one creature); +30 vs. Will

Hit: The target is dominated until the end of your next turn, and you must use its actions to help you pursue the object of your desire.

Miss: This power is not expended, but it cannot be used again until the end of the encounter.

Attack Power (Charm) ✦ **Daily** (No Action)

Trigger: The DM informs you of an object of your desire, but the first action you take on your next turn is not to pursue acquisition of or interaction with the object.

Attack: Ranged 50 (you); +30 vs. Will

Hit: You are dominated by the *eye* until the end of your next turn, and you must use your actions to pursue the object of your desire.

Miss: This power is not expended, but it cannot be used again until the end of the encounter.

About the Author

Eytan Bernstein is an editor of educational publications by day and a freelance writer, editor, and designer of RPGs by night. The Far Realm corrupted him at a young age, and its influence shows in all his work. Eytan has contributed to fourteen books and more than forty articles for Wizards of the Coast, as well as numerous products for other publishers. He can be found musing at www.eytanbernstein.com.

Rumor Has It

100 Rumors for Your Campaign

By Skip Williams

Illustration by Kieran Yanner

Players have a habit of asking vexing questions, such as: "What rumors are circulating around here?" Fear not! Here are 100 rumors that characters could hear when they visit a town, spend a night at a roadside inn, camp along the road with a caravan, or anywhere else player characters encounter NPCs and pick up rumors. The individual rumors are numbered so DMs can roll percentile dice to select one or more randomly.

Most of these rumors are the sorts of tidbits that player characters might simply overhear or uncover when conversing with nonplayer characters, but a few are more appropriate as announcements that characters hear from town criers, read on handbills, discover in found books, or glean from bards' tales. With minor revisions, a DM could present any rumor from the list in any fashion.

Some rumors are hooks to adventures that have been published in recent issues of Dungeon magazine. These are tagged with the relevant issue number, adventure title, and level. Most, however, are simply news about possible encounters or side treks farther down the road. A few are blatantly false or red herrings (unless the DM chooses to make them real), and some are downright crazy (even the true ones can seem a little crazy sometimes).

01—Many islands, large and small, dot these waters. You can safely go ashore on most of them, but have a care. Some are home to bizarre creatures ranging from crazy sorceresses to headhunting giants.

02—Our duke has left the city, supposedly on a diplomatic mission; however, he never arrived at his destination and no travelers can be found who saw him anywhere along the road. Meanwhile, the city is under the rule of an austere magistrate who already has meted out horribly severe punishments for offenses both major and minor.

03—Small groups of riders, all cowled and cloaked, have been plying the local trails and byways looking for information about a member of the gentry who vanished years ago.

04—Want to try something different? The crazy duke who rules over the border west (or east, north, or south) of here sponsors an equally eccentric competition each year; the contest's rules and nature change annually. (*Owlbear Run*, levels 4–6, Dungeon 213)

05—If you're heading down this road, be wise and bypass the crossroads lying barely ten leagues hence. An inexplicable plague afflicts the village that stands at that crossroads. (*The Elder Elemental Eye*™, levels 1–3, Dungeon 214)

06—The ruined pile of a monastery on the horizon isn't deserted; some squatters have moved in. Their

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leader is a disgraced cleric who seeks redemption before his offended deity.

07—It's true that our king is a usurper, but his predecessor was a demented tyrant. Still, some would prefer to see the throne occupied by one of royal blood. Several legitimate, if distant, heirs remain, but they are in hiding. If only we could find them!

08—Beware beggars and cats! My cousin chased an old panhandler into an abandoned house, where he found dozens of cats dancing under the moon in the courtyard. They dragged him into their circle and forced him to dance until he nearly collapsed. He might have died there, but then the moon disappeared behind clouds and rain scattered the cats.

09—There was a big battle in the field just beyond the river. Knights from three kingdoms clashed. Two armies supposedly were allied against the third, but it was a trap. One of the allies switched sides, and they practically annihilated the dupes. The defeated general was captured and dragged off in chains and has never been seen again. For all we know, he's still a captive in the duke's dungeons. I'm sure he'd pay a pretty reward to anyone who set him free.

10—Don't cross the pass until the first hard frost. A flower that blooms there produces a pollen that drives people mad. Last year, a caravan tried to push through at the wrong time, and the travelers pranced around like deer while their mounts trampled them. Only a handful escaped alive.

11—One night not ten days ago, two strangers were sitting at that very table talking about a jewel. They fell to arguing and one wound up killing the other with a dagger. The killer escaped into the inky black streets and is still at large—presumably with the jewel.

12—Four headstrong youths, two lads and two maids, fled the town to escape an arranged marriage between two of them. Why the extra couple joined them poses something of a mystery, but their parents are obviously concerned.

13—The Princess Salima, who is regent for her imprisoned brother, has unexpectedly elevated a common soldier (and foreign mercenary) to supreme command of the army. The decision has not been popular among the career officers. There have even been whispers of a palace coup in the brewing, if you put any faith in idle talk.

14—No less than six aristocratic youths are planning to fight duels over a slur leveled at a bride on her wedding day.

15—The local centaurs, who have always been standoffish, have become positively hostile after a centaur trader was found strangled in a thicket bordering a lane just outside town. Now everyone is afraid to enter the forest to hunt or even to gather firewood.

16—If you are a stranger to the desert, don't travel without a trusted guide, even if you plan to stick to major trails. A group lost its way in a sandstorm and wandered for weeks before staggering into an oasis west of here half-dead from heat and thirst. They told a tale of a glittering city at the center of the storm, guarded by bewitched sentries and ruled by a hideous demon. The desert plays deadly tricks.

17—That smoking peak in the distance was once a dormant volcano. It has begun erupting again, even regularly. That's not all. A cruel overlord now demands a regular tribute of slaves from settlements in the vale below the peak. (*Some Like it Hot*, levels 17-20, Dungeon 219)

18—Attention! All citizens and visitors must be indoors and behind closed doors by nightfall. (Each evening, a strange wind brings the stench of corruption. Animals subjected to the wind sicken and die. Humanoids develop a variety of ailments ranging from painful boils to raving insanity.)

19—See that young cleric there? He's quietly hiring adventurers to search for some long-lost religious colony, or so I'm told. He's trying to keep it quiet, so mum's the word. (*Blood of Gruumsh*, levels 4-6, Dungeon 210)

20—The tomb of a powerful wizard, located atop a hill on the wizard's now-abandoned estate, was opened recently and found not to contain the wizard's body at all, but a servant's corpse.

21—An early winter has settled over the land. So far, the light frosts haven't done much damage, but on chilly mornings, the windows of the main temple to Pelor (or another deity of your choosing) often bear grotesque patterns that are disturbing to look at. The priests have to melt them off with fire; the sun alone won't do it.

22—An itinerant mercenary who was awaiting trial for killing a minor priest has escaped from the town jail. He swore he'd get revenge on the whole town when he was locked up. We figured that was just talk, but folk are scared now.

23—Don't disturb the bowls of milk left on the doorsteps at night. They're offerings for the fairies. If the fairies don't get their proper gifts, there'll be a changeling in at least one cradle by dawn.

24—On an island in the river lies a shattered ruin populated only by a legion of very lifelike statues. Fishermen say the statues come to life during the new moon, when they wade up and down river, beneath the water, to raid homesteads and manors along the banks and carry away as much loot as they can.

25—I tell you, I've never seen anything so creepy. A whole village and all the land around it drained of

color. Everything faded to shades of gray. (*Fall of the Gray Veil*, levels 2–4, Dungeon 211)

26—In ancient times, this city was a tiny village where an extraordinary swordsmith lived and worked. The smith made and sold hundreds of blades. What was not known at the time was that the smith believed only the artisan who made an object ever could be its true owner, and that a "buyer" was only borrowing an item for his or her lifetime. Even now, the smith's ghost walks the land, looking for and reclaiming every blade he (or she) ever forged.

27—Only a few miles downstream from here, a bloodthirsty cult of reptile lovers make an annual sacrifice to the river's crocodiles. Their evil leader is said to be immortal. (*Tears of the Crocodile God*, levels 15–17, Dungeon 209)

28—Falling stars really are tiny, flaming chariots used by hunters from beyond the moon. These hunters seek out only the rarest prey: unicorns, dragons, and the like. In fact, that's why those creatures are so rare—they were more plentiful in olden days, before these hunters came after them.

29—The old widow and hedge witch who lives outside the village actually is a spy for a band of evil humanoids. Everyone knows it, but they're all afraid to do anything about it.

30—A group of priests and soldiers carrying a reliquary that held the bones of a holy warrior vanished somewhere on the road between here and the next town. That's a double tragedy, because aside from the (presumed) loss of life, the reliquary is needed every generation for a ritual that renews the seal on a gate to Stygia (or some other malignant plane). If the ritual isn't performed soon, that gate will open and all sorts of nightmare creatures will be set loose.

31—An old farmer who jealously keeps his barn locked says he's protecting his prize bull, but the last time one of his bulls won a prize was 35 years ago. If that animal is still alive, then something unnatural is going on. Might explain why the old geezer has been seen traipsing around the woods, talking to toadstools and hanging raven feathers from dead trees.

32—The moors around here are just the beginnings of a desolate wasteland that was once the site of a thriving empire, long since destroyed in a cataclysmic war. You can see its remnants in a sprinkling of stone circles, earthen mounds, and broken lines of stone walls. Humanoids and other creatures eking out a living in the wastes have rebuilt or moved into some of these, but most sites are ruins. They say the ancients still slumber beneath those tumbled piles and seek revenge on those who disturb them, but reward those who protect their resting places.

33—Don't let appearances fool you. Even a village full of law-abiding citizens can go to seed, if a collection of bandits and evil monsters settles in next door. I've been to such a place. A handful of bold adventurers could really make a difference there. (*The Village of Hommlet*™, levels 1–3, Dungeon 212).

34—Beyond that headland begins a stretch of coast where a pirate lord reigns supreme, thanks to his alliance with a band of sahuagin. (*The Dread Pirate Braxis*, levels 4–6, Dungeon 213)

35—Dwarves once ruled a stronghold on the mountain—you can barely make out its entrance from here, just at the base of that escarpment—but they mined too deeply and angered subterranean creatures that overwhelmed them. Some sort of spider-things, or so they say. It was a bad business. (*Fjorin's Foothold*, levels 3–5, Dungeon 209)

36—Feel free to talk to anyone around here, and be assured that you can do legitimate business with anyone you like. Choose your friends carefully, though. Some of the aristocratic houses in this land are locked in a deadly struggle. They don't fight openly (not often anyway), but they fight plenty dirty.

37—Many of the gardens around here include flowers that sing at dawn. I'm not kidding! Each flower can tell you something useful once a day, but you must ask politely or it might curse you.

38—You can't miss it, if you're foolish enough to ride out that way. There's a rocky hill that looks for all the world like a half-buried skull with a gaping eye socket. Vicious, cunning gnolls have laid claim to it, and they ruthlessly hunt other humanoids through the surrounding hills. (*Never Say Die*, levels 5–7, Dungeon 212)

39—I'm sorry if you're finding prices a bit high, but the ships coming to this port have been having a heap of trouble with pirates lately. Same thing goes for caravans using the coast road. The sea raiders use small vessels to quickly board and search ships. The land raiders infiltrate the caravans. They take just enough to raise everyone's expenses. It's almost as if they're all searching for something.

40—Wanted: A stalwart band with an appreciation for art and history to help a scholar with fieldwork. The first choice of any spoils go to those who do the heavy work (or fighting).

41—Petty crimes—mostly thefts—have plagued the residents around here for several months. No one has seen the culprits because all the crime happened in the dead of night. Lately, the unseen criminals have stepped up to kidnapping—and murder. (*Some Assembly Required*, levels 1–3, Dungeon 208)

42—My neighbor is going nuts over crows. He says they're raiding his garden—no surprise there—but now he claims they're raiding his house, too. He says

they jimmied the windows open and slipped inside, if you can believe that. I say he just forgot and left it open, but he swears it was closed and locked when he went to sleep.

43—The statuary and reliefs in our temple look so lifelike because the sculptor got actual fiends and angels to pose as models. That's one workshop you don't want to visit without an invitation.

44—I tell you, I've never seen the like; farms, villages, and towns smashed to bits or reduced to dust as if ground under merciless rollers. (*The Rolling Tomb*, levels 21-23, Dungeon 215)

45—Once every generation, the eagles nesting on that mountain carry off a child and raise it as one of their own. Those kids grow up to be strange people, that's for sure. One of them's right over there, perched in the corner.

46—The handle on that dagger is carved from a single tooth of a monstrous purple worm that came out of the forest a few months ago. Hunters traced the monster to a big sinkhole. Some awful, weird things still climb out of that hole on the darkest nights.

47—Last night, a pitched battle was fought at the castle. Attackers struck the top of a tower and killed a few guards and an officer before fleeing again. How did they get to the top of a guarded tower without being noticed? Your guess is as good as mine, friend.

48—Stay on the marked trails when traversing the jungle hereabouts. Hostile natives lurk in the trackless shadows, and the jungle hides tumbledown ruins where even more deadly foes lurk. (*The Hidden Shrine of Tamoachan*™, levels 6-8, Dungeon 209)

49—Mind your Ps and Qs tonight. See that man over there—the one who looks a bit like someone's nutty old uncle? He's a "retired" inquisitor—but some whisper that he's still on the job.

50—Wanted: Intrepid adventurers to track down an audacious thief. (*Dark Lantern*, levels 6-8, Dungeon 214)

51—A quartet of wizards came through here last month. The wizards asked a whole lot of questions about the hedge maze at the old ruined manse in the woods outside of town. Eventually they stopped asking questions and went out there, but none of them came back. No one's seen hide nor hair of them since around here.

52—My neighbor has a nephew who talks to snakes. It's creepy, what that kid can get them to do.

53—That Ciodaru was one mean wizard. Was, really. He went hunting some upstart spellcaster last week and seems to have got himself killed. It's hard to imagine a powerful wizard like that defeated by some novice. At least I hope this new kid's less belligerent than Ciodaru.

54—Man, that kid is the soup. He might be some fancy spy, but the folks who have him are selling him to the highest bidder. (*The Vulture's Feast*, levels 6-8, Dungeon 210)

55—It's been a great mushroom harvest this year, but those foragers who pushed farthest into the woods have been finding more than just tasty fungi.

56—Our overlord plans to release an infamous prisoner—a royal official accused of corruption—from the dungeon soon. I wouldn't want to be in his shoes, after what he did to the people of this town.

57—Have you seen our weeping statue? Lay a coin at its feet at dusk or dawn. If the statue sheds a single tear, you'll have good fortune. If it cries a stream of tears, you'll lose something you value. Always leave the coin, even if the statue does nothing at all. Taking it back again is guaranteed to bring bad luck.

58—It's OK to go into the guildhall, but make sure you're not the last to leave at night. If you linger too long by yourself, you might never be seen again.

59—My cousin Michel has a friend who saw some owlbears down at old Giles's field last week.

60—A ranger who won renown for protecting a halfling village has abruptly become an evil warlord. He now leads a growing band of wicked humanoids. (*Massacre at Misty River*, levels 7-9, Dungeon 219)

61—A monstrous hound, furtive and spectral, stalks the lanes and highways. So far, it hasn't done anything but frighten people, but its presence spells doom for someone.

62—Wagons need to go slow around here. There's a killer (or maybe a whole group of killers) causing dangerous accidents by shoving things into the spokes of wagon wheels while the wagons are moving at high speed. No one knows how it's being done.

63—The stuff is just plain gone! They say an evil hag who makes her lair in a dismal swamp has found a method for invading any home, no matter how secure, and taking whatever she wants. (*Glitterdust*, level 1, Dungeon 211)

64—The wooded hill outside town actually is an overgrown orchard that hides a crumbling manor. Restless spirits haunt it and guard the departed family's treasures.

65—The leaders from a couple of bandit groups met in secret (or so they thought) not long ago and agreed to join forces for a time. The two groups undoubtedly are meeting somewhere nearby, most likely in the

caves under the ridge behind town, and cooking up some vile mischief.

66—In a hidden vale in the mountains lies a city where a faerie queen rules. Most of the time, mortals cannot enter or even find the city. From time to time, however, a mortal youth feels the city's call and vanishes into the vale forever. A fortnight ago, it was our baron's firstborn who vanished. He'd give anything to have his son brought home again.

67—A ravening beast stalks the fens. When it gets hungry, it slinks into a building and devours everything it can find. It leaves nothing behind except buttons, belt buckles, and other metal.

68—A widely admired citizen recently went berserk and broke into several homes by smashing holes in the walls. Now he (or she) lies bound in chains, writhing and babbling and foaming at the mouth.

69—The cobbler's son says he saw a shining castle atop a cloud yesterday. Normally no one would pay any attention to such talk, but those are the first words the boy's spoken in nine years.

70—Lately, the shadows in the nearby forest have gotten deeper, darker, and, well, inkier. The very trees seem to move, making well-known paths vanish or lead to false destinations.

71—Feeling tough, buddy? Only a week's ride from here lies a ruined tower, and below that, a rambling dungeon filled with ancient treasures. The catch? An insane wizard and an army of monsters jealously guard all the loot. (*No Rest for the Wicked*, levels 7-9, Dungeon 214)

72—A wizard and a band of goblins have joined forces to conduct some sort of search. Even now, the goblins (and presumably the wizard) are encamped near an abandoned dwarven stronghold in the hills to the east. Adventurers are said to have cleaned it out decades ago, but this wizard seems to think they missed something important.

73—Something strange is happening at the old caravanserai on the north road. Plenty of travelers still use the site without any problems, but a few shipments never made it to the next town after laying over there for a night; I know from my brother-in-law's letters. He keeps tabs on the local trade for me. I know what you're thinking—bandits—but none of the missing goods or people have shown up in any of the surrounding market towns.

74—All the spoons in this town keep disappearing: silver, pewter, tin, it doesn't make a difference. If this keeps up, we'll all be slurping our soup and our porridge straight from the bowl, like barbarians.

75—Three nights ago, the watch captain came in from gate duty mumbling about an apparition that beckoned to him, trying to lure him into stepping off the wall. I figured he'd been drinking, but now other watch members swear they've seen something, too, in the "graveyard" hours between midnight and dawn.

76—Far beyond the margins of the world lies an extraordinary library where a scholar can uncover any secret—for a price. (*Court of the Dark Prince*, levels 28-30, Dungeon 212)

77—Have you heard? Our duke has set his cap for an orphaned lady, well heeled and fair of face, to be sure, but with no connections. Perhaps it's true love. That young fellow there is the duke's messenger; he's probably carrying a secret love note to the lady.

78—Wanted: A few doughty souls with pure hearts and their own torches and tinderboxes.

79—So, then the warlord vowed to destroy the whole castle, knights and all. I dunno, I think maybe he has enough troops to really do it. (*Siege of Gardmore Abbey*, level 6, Dungeon 210)

80—Our fishermen say that the islands a half-mile or so out in the lake (or sea or ocean) have become ringed with grinding ice. That water seldom freezes over even in winter, and it's summer now. I haven't been out there, but you can see the islands from the docks; it's obvious the trees have lost their leaves already. That's an evil omen if ever I saw one.

81—This is a bad situation, traveler. First it was the wind, and then this oddly windproof mist that descended on the town. Now, strange fey creatures come out of the mist—and the local fey claim to know nothing about it. Right. It's typical that just when we need their help, they suddenly have nothing to say. (*Beyond the Crystal Cave*™, levels 1-3, Dungeon 211)

82—The big trade and harvest fair held down in the valley has been canceled for this year. I heard something about flying beasts making it too dangerous to gather in crowds. Do you believe that? I think the merchants are up to some shenanigans.

83—That old wizard who lives in that eyesore of a tower should keep his (or her) gaggle of apprentices in line. Maybe if those students spent some time pulling weeds and fixing the roof they'd have less time for pranks in town.

84—Our baron's wastrel son has done it this time. He hopped a caravan to follow some dancer and vanished into the wild—along with the rest of the caravan and the baron's prize stallion. The baron is heartbroken without him—the horse, I mean.

85—We're in mourning all this season after losing two young princes to a fatal accident in the castle cellar. Right. Someone needs to take a close look at that cellar—but first they'd have to get past the steward, who also happens to be the king's nephew.

86—The hermit who lives in a cave south of town has a new acolyte who claims to be some sort of oracle. They've sent several locals on long pilgrimages that are supposed to bring them some material or spiritual benefit. I guess we won't know until they get back, if they ever do.

87—A wealthy merchant has been afflicted with a strange malady that defies all attempts at a cure. The merchant's physician believes she knows how to affect a cure, but she needs certain rare and exotic ingredients to produce it. The merchant himself is willing to pay handsomely for the components, but his children don't seem to share his enthusiasm for finding a cure.

88—A brash young nobleman defied his parents and his overlord to join the army as a common soldier. The lad vows to return with a trumpet or drum captured from the enemy. His courage is admirable but the lad is no fighter, and his unit is already marching for the frontier.

89—Pirates have long bedeviled this coast. Not even poor fisherman were safe. Now, at least one captain has taken to murder and to looting whole towns. (*Captain Slygo's Treasure*, levels 2–4, Dungeon 208)

90—Some very shady characters have been poking around and asking a great many questions about the people in town. They seem to be looking for old Gintars, a barely adequate street magician—little more than a performing beggar really. No one has a clue what anyone could want with him.

91—People have been visiting the nearby salt spring for years to collect the brine, and there was always plenty for everyone. But for the past week, every person who has gone out to the spring has failed to return to town, including a group of armed watchmen. Until today, that is, when one of those watchmen crawled back into town dehydrated, scorched, and nearly blind.

92—An important young noblewoman is living in disguise among the commoners while searching for a stolen ring.

93—Those long swaths of trampled grass you see? They're made by legions of hares, all marching in step. The butcher's kid knows somebody who saw them. No garden in the kingdom is safe!

94—The baron's daughter has locked herself in her room, though some say the baron himself is holding her prisoner until she consents to spin all his straw into golden thread, or some such nonsense.

95—If you must visit that town, make sure you are indoors and well barricaded once the sun goes down. Every slave and common laborer in the place is a cannibal. They slay only travelers, so the locals tolerate it, but they don't venture out at night, either.

96—A banished noble has fled over the border intending to raise an army to invade the country and wreak vengeance on his (or her) enemies. There will be plenty of work on both sides for warriors and hired killers before this is over.

97—Climb that peak on a clear day and you'll see it: A forlorn hill that hides a crypt packed with rich treasures, deadly traps, and not a few loathsome guardians. Including, perhaps, the old wizard who built the place, lingering beyond death. But heed this advice: that's the last place you want to go, because it's likely to be the last place you ever do go. (*Tomb of Horrors*™, levels 14–16, Dungeon 213)

98—Far away on the trackless steppes stands a city that consists of a single, massive building. A traveler recently appeared in town bearing a sack full of baubles from that city and a tale of two warring factions of squatters desperately trying to annihilate each other.

99—The aggressive overlord from our neighboring city to the west has conquered three other cities and slain their rulers. It's said he has a dragon as an ally. Even if we make peace with him, this does not bode well for the peace to last.

00—Bandits waylaid a group of travelers not far from here last week. The attackers fell back after a furious battle. They didn't grab much of value but they did drag away two captive halflings. The survivors needed a few days to recover before they dared to pursue. We never heard whether they caught up with the bandits or rescued the halflings.

About the Author

Skip Williams has been active in the game industry since 1974, when he took up wargaming and roleplaying in high school. He soon got an afterschool job at TSR, Inc., the original publisher of the D&D® game, and the rest (as they say) is history.

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

ED GREENWOOD'S
Eye on the Realms

The Speaking Skull of Themtraver Hall

By Ed Greenwood

Illustration by Eric Belisle

In the northernmost back streets of Saerloon are twenty-some decaying, formerly grand mansions. One among them is rising to local public attention out of fear: Themtraver Hall, the home of a haunting said to bring the dead back to stalk and harass the living.

In the gloomy, rotten-floored Hall dwells the Speaking Skull—and she (the tales all say "she") seeks to goad the living to deal death, strife, and destruction. By night floating skulls whisper secrets, old angers, and reminders of injustices, and they never stop smiling.

The Dowagers

The "Dowagers" are what Saerloonians call the twenty-seven decaying Northside mansions abandoned decades ago by their owners for newer and more fashionable abodes.[1] These days, they are home to squatters, landlords who let individual rooms to those who lack much coin, and merchants who gut rooms and install creaking rope-and-pulley platform elevators to turn these leaking, pigeon- and rat-infested hulks into warehouses.

Like most houses in Sembian port cities, the Dowagers lack any grounds, being surrounded directly by shallow, open-trough, raincatch drainage gutters and the street. Some of them have grand gates opening onto steep stone steps that rise to even grander front doors raised a story or more above the street.[2] All of them are stoutly built of stone, with massive internal pillars that can keep something standing for centuries, even if reduced to roofless, collapsed-floors ruin.

They were all built on what was once a fashionable new expansion of Saerloon, farthest from the stenches of its harbor and dockside foundries, with streets befitting the luxuries that rich Sembians could afford. Wide streets were ideal for turning and loading the largest caravan wagons—so, when wealth went elsewhere and glittering fashion with it, the Northside became a district of warehouses, cooperworks, wagonworks, and cratemakers. A hard-working back

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corner of Saerloon, it has been working steadily—and getting increasingly more run down—ever since.

Until recently, the best known of these huge, many-windowed, slate-roofed hulks was "the Sarnsarl Sisters" on Rope Lane, a huge rooming house run by two sharp-tongued widows with pretensions of grandeur that led to them often repainting the outside walls of the huge mansion they'd inherited—but never fixing the leaking roof.

Hardcoin traders of the city were better acquainted with Sustrus Halander's Allhouse on Sprindul Street,[3] a huge and cluttered buy-and-sell "oddlots" emporium dealing in salvaged and left-behind cargoes from the docks, the leavings of failed businesses, and stuff too abundant or too flawed to sell. Halander's was one of those "you can get anything" places that furnished many a Saerloonian in a hurry with rope or cord, coffers, hinges or hasps, weathercloaks and impromptu disguises, carts and chests, replacement cartwheels and axles, roughly used tools, and lamp oil. Halander's was a name known to most Saerloonians, even if they'd never been near the place, and it was one of the most famous Northside landmarks.

At least, that was the situation until the hauntings began in Themtraver Hall.

What Folk Say

The tales of the Speaking Skull of Themtraver Hall are many, varied, and in most cases, obviously wildly embellished.[4] The shared heart of most, however, describes a haunting that steals forth by night in the form of a flying skull. It seeks the bodies of the dying or the recently dead, and it somehow melts away the flesh of necks and heads to animate skulls as floating, speaking, aware horrors that can, in turn, reanimate their bodies.

The Speaking Skull commands these "spawn" (whispering flying skulls sometimes accompanied by the lurching, decaying bodies that were theirs in life) and sends them forth to whisper to the living. These are usually living persons known to the spawn when they were alive, so they can speak of what they know.

They are sent to try to manipulate the living into doing the Speaking Skull's bidding—and it desires to frighten and anger humans to bring about lawlessness, fear, deaths, and neighbor up in arms against neighbor. It wants old feuds reopened, old rivalries rekindled, and the maximum number of humans killed or left dying for the Speaking Skull to take over, explore the memories of, and thus ever increase its knowledge and power. It seeks to conquer and rule Saerloon—and perhaps the wider world.

What Elminster Knows

The Speaking Skull is a demilich, the remains of the fell and brilliant sorceress Shalass Craeth, who married and slew—in unpleasant necromantic experimentations—a succession of wealthy Sembian merchants to become rich and powerful, indeed.[5]

Before her undeath,[6] she perfected a by-touch spell that melts away the flesh from the heads of certain human corpses or the willing dying and transforms the revealed skulls into variants of the infamous flameskull. Craeth's flying skulls lack the *flame ray* and *fireball* powers of a flameskull—and have no aura of flames at all, only nonfiery flickerings in their eye sockets that look like cold white flames—but instead can at will *command* their former bodies (now zombie rotters) with care and precision.[7] They can *dimension door* as well (including their zombie body, if this power is called upon while skull is touching body).[8] Craeth and her flying skulls share another ability: they can regain lost hit points in a brief burst of roiling darkness.[9]

The flying skulls retain the memories and speech they had in life,[10] but they are the absolute mental slaves of Craeth, whose mind can "see" out of their eyes and share their thoughts, regardless of distance.[11]

Over time, they gain her hatred of the living and her malicious desire to sew strife and hatred, and they drift from being her helpless minions to being her eager servants, sharing her dreams of dark dominion and glee at harming the living.

Into the Mansion

Themtraver Hall is locked up as tight as many a fortress, with its sturdy ironbar gates chained shut by multiple chains and flying skulls lurking to attack anyone trying to force entry. The gates open onto the bottom stair of a steep flight of stone steps ascending into a covered entryway, where two heavy sharpened portcullises will slam down, one partway up the steps and one on the top step in front of the front doors (directed by Craeth, who seeks to impale intruders). The front doors themselves are both welded shut and barred from within; they will have to be laboriously broken down, and flying skulls and their zombie bodies will relentlessly attack anyone trying.

Themtraver Hall has no windows anywhere on its ground floor, and its narrow, boarded-up back door will have to be battered down. This opens onto a narrow corridor pierced with holes in its walls, floor, and ceiling that allow zombies to thrust various polearms at intruders in a deadly gauntlet.

The darkly paneled rooms of the six floors above the ground floor have been stripped of everything over the years except large furniture and are lightless and bleak. (The three levels of dank cellars are much worse.) The zombies and flying skulls know the layout of the linked rooms and staircases, as well as which floors can be trusted and which are on the brink of collapse. They will use this cover to harry and weaken any bands of intruders, trying to lure them into a room where the floor will give way and plunge the intruders into damaging falls and ambushes where multiple zombies can attack them at once.

Craeth will use her spells from afar to wound and weaken intruders, attempting to slay one to gain

a new minion (and useful weapons or magic), but she will avoid a confrontation that might reveal her directly if intruders can be induced to flee without reaching the attics and turrets of the Hall, where she spends most of her time. This is also where she has hidden her magic items (in concealed places such as under removable stone steps in the stairs of the secret passages that ascend to the uppermost rooms).

Craeth is somewhat vain about her appearance. She has cast many preservative spells on her (headless) body, maintains a large collection of gowns, high-heeled boots, lingerie, and wigs, and makes use of cosmetics and scents. Her control over her own body is deft; from anywhere in the mansion she can make it dance, climb things, curl alluringly around furniture and intruders, and so on—keeping its balance to perform intricate tasks such as lockpicking (something she was adept at in life) as if it still had a head and keen-in-the-dark vision.

When she knows she will encounter intruders in her mansion, she likes to scare them with her headless body, but if they persist, they will finally encounter her finely gowned like a preening lady of sophistication—who just happens to have no neck and a head that is a bare skull with glowing lights in its empty eye sockets, floating above her neck.

If pressed in battle, she will use her spells to escape and hide elsewhere in the Realms, where she can plot revenge on her attackers—and where she can use her flying skull minions and their zombie bodies to misdirect and hamper pursuers.

The Speaking Skull's Plans

Shalass Craeth's immediate goals are to swell the ranks of her minions (flying skulls with zombie bodies), gain magic items she can use, destroy spellcasters who can seriously threaten her, and (like all demiliches) capture souls.

In the years ahead, she wants to rule Saerloon from behind the scenes, manipulating the living to bring her choice souls and magic and furnish her with dozens of grand mansions where she can hide and cache magic—as well as house her growing army of minions. She is convinced their zombie bodies can surely be improved from the slow, clumsy lurchers they are now to more formidable and agile zombies who can lurk and spy, wield magic items effectively, and even outrun foes.

Perhaps, in time, she can gain superior bodies—adventurers' bodies—to serve as alternative bodies for herself, allowing her to fly from one of them to another as she needs their various talents.

After all, Larloch, Szass Tam, and others have all enjoyed long careers of ruling and dominance . . . why shouldn't she?

Notes

1. In a few cases amid the ruthless mercantile rough-and-tumble of Sembian life, the owners of these mansions traded them not for more fashionable digs but for more modest lives of increasing squalor, usually far from Saerloon.

2. Typically these outside steps ascended from ornate wrought-iron gates, between statuary-bedecked forewings that were often given over to the storage of coaches and horses, to a "forestep" flanked by large lanterns (and often impressive human-shaped statues).

3. "Hardcoin traders" is a now-widespread Heartlands term for struggling, lower-class, or down-on-their-luck merchants who are often fences of stolen goods and who almost always deal in a great variety of "small goods." They make up the majority of merchants who aren't shopkeepers or crafters (those who make things) in any city. A hardcoin trader often finds buyers and sellers at prices a few coppers apart and "lives in the middle" between these varying prices.

4. Themtraver Hall was built by a shipwright, Elastur Themtraver, who loved impressive architecture. He had his high-ceilinged home paneled in exotic woods from afar and floored in glossy wide-board wooden floors—which are now rotting pitfall traps for unwary intruders into the mansion. The Hall has several secret passages, many internal balconies and galleries, and more than a few grand staircases—one of which fell under the weight of a large band of adventurers, bringing them down hard atop *another* band of adventurers who were cautiously exploring the room below.

The Themtravers relocated to Yhaunn when Elastur died of a fever, simply walking away from their fully furnished home. It has been plundered many times, but no one has ever dared to take up lasting residence inside—until the arrival of Shalass Craeth.

5. Shalass Craeth was born Shalasstrae Craethil, the only offspring of well-to-do textile merchants of Tantras. Strikingly good-looking, amoral, and very clever, she traveled the Dragonreach with her father, exploiting her good looks as she learned to become a capable trader. She also learned she had a hunger for controlling men, a fascination with undeath, and an innate ability to wield the Art. She took to spying on sorcerers—and eventually to pouncing on them at moments of weakness or distraction, and with necromantic magics of her own devising, learning all she could from them before slaying them and seizing their properties. She added her parents to her growing list of victims, and she took up a life of secretly pursuing necromantic sorcery while publicly parlaying properties and rents into a formidable fortune. This made her attractive to rapacious Sembian merchants—more than a dozen of whom wed her, but soon learned they had made a fatal mistake. (With dark humor, Shalass named the first caravel of her shipping fleet *The Fatal Mistake*.) Most prominent among her murdered husbands were the investor

and metals-caster Arklustrus Borbrull, the shipping fleet owners Halavran Toldoavur and his bitter rival Aunklyn Dree, the caravan company owner Lord Eraun Talivar, and the pipe- and valve-maker Orlond Pravurtlan.

6. Self-induced, as the wrinkles and frailties of old age took hold and she became what she despised—physically weak and increasingly reliant upon others.

7. The flying skulls can precisely control their own bodies—but no other zombies—when within 90 feet. Beyond that range their control fails, and they can force their zombie bodies only to move in a general direction or to attack (or not attack) specific targets. If no unbroken line of sight is between skull and zombie, no control at all is possible until this is restored, and the zombie functions on its own, behaving as all zombie rotters do.

8. Initially four times a day, but as they gain power (success and longevity in undeath), they gain additional usages, up to seven times in 24 hours.

Aside from the differences in powers described herein, flying skulls created by Craeth are identical to flameskulls (for all gaming statistics).

9. This momentarily apparent, agitated aura of shadowy darkness is the visible manifestation of a "Surge of Undeath" ability, usable once every seven hours, that restores 4d4 lost hit points.

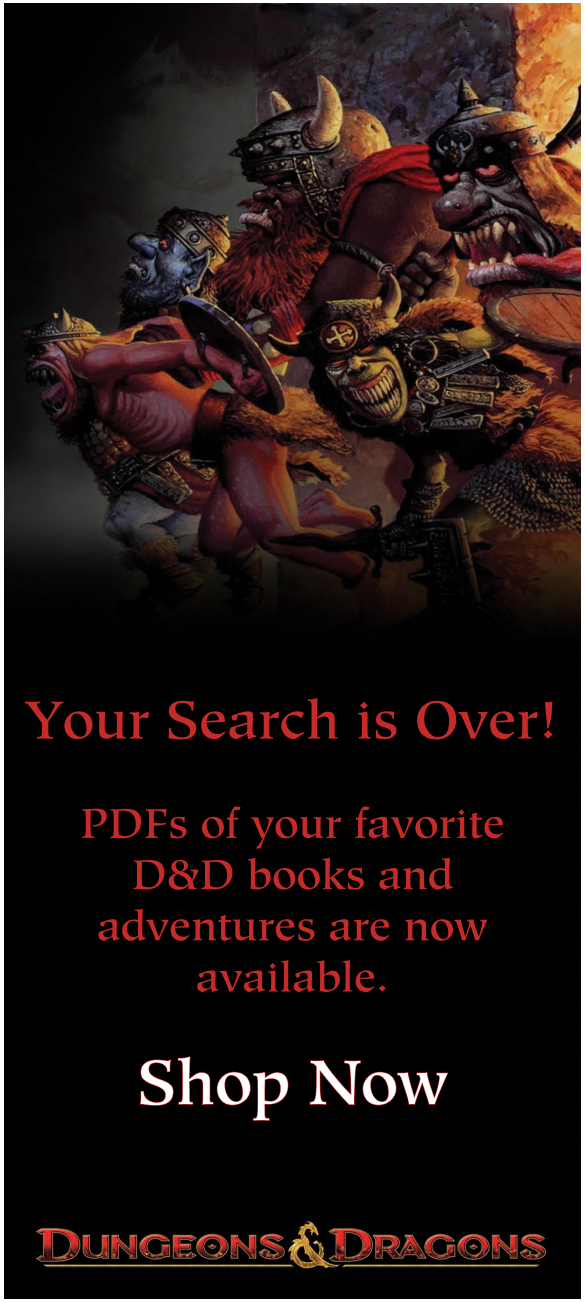
10. The skulls even retain their singing voices and skills—or lack of same—that they had when alive, as well as any talent for mimicry.

11. Craeth can, when she concentrates on doing so, see and hear what one flying skull at a time sees and hears—as long as it is on the same plane of existence as she is. She must choose to do so and does not spend all that much of her time "seeing through" skull after skull. A skull can send a mental cry her way to attract her attention, but Craeth often ignores these attempts to distract her.

Moreover, Craeth's connection to the flying skulls she animated can be temporarily blocked by certain spells and magical barriers, such as enclosing a flying skull in a chest, coffer, or coffin treated with particular spells.

About the Author

Ed Greenwood is the man who unleashed the Forgotten Realms® setting on an unsuspecting world. He works in libraries, plus he writes fantasy, science fiction, horror, mystery, and romance stories (sometimes all in the same novel), but he is happiest when churning out Realmslore, Realmslore, and more Realmslore. He still has a few rooms in his house in which space remains to pile up more papers.



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